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Then hell tore loose from its hinges
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Smashing Saga of a Montana Range-Feud

When the By WALT COBURN Gun-Wolves Howl!

"NOTICE TO THEM IT CONCERNS: Jimmy Dixon is holed up in Alkali, and he ain't alone. None of us will be hard to find, if you hombres got the weight and color guts to look. Ike Pattee—you bragged you was taking the Bar D spread. We're giving you your chance to do it, or die, as of now. And may the howling wolves never cease!"



Chapter I

SHOOTIN' SCAPE

JIMMY DIXON had no intention of getting into trouble when he and old Buck Bell left their winter line camp down on the mouth of Cow Creek.

"That boy was a-rarin' over backwards to steer clear of hell-raisin'," swore griz-

zled old Buck Bell. "I'd orter know. Me'n Jimmy wintered together. Git snowed in like that, and there ain't much about a young feller like Jimmy that an older hand ain't found out.

"And I don't give a hoot what kind of story that spur-jinglin' Ike Pattee peddled to Old Man Dixon. I'll gamble all I

got, that shootin' scrape wasn't started by Jimmy. Fu'thermore—"

Old Buck left it hanging like that in the air—and got his old wooden-handled six-shooter out of his warsack.

They had Jimmy Dixon locked up in jail by then. Jimmy's old man, Hank Dixon, was in town hiring a lawyer. Big Ike Pattee, the Bar D ramrod, was riding herd on Old Man Hank and looking wise. Half a dozen hand-picked Bar D cowhands sprinkled around the cow town of Alkali, Montana, staying too sober for cowboys in town—traveling in pairs and packing six-shooters.

Buck Bell had sobered up almighty fast, and his town spree was plumb ruined before it ran its week's course. He was drinking only enough Forty Rod to ward off the shakes and cut the phlegm in his throat. He prowled Alkali like some big bull whipped out of the herd by a younger, tougher bull. His cussing sounding like the low rumbling of an old bull.

"If Ike should bother ol' Buck right now," somebody predicted, "that Bar D ramrod will git the worst of it. Bin a long time since Buck clawed for a gun. Five will git you fifty, misters, Buck ain't lost the knack of it."

Over at the Alkali jail Jimmy Dixon sat on the edge of his bunk and tried to figure out what had happened. Up to a certain point he could think it out step by step. Up to where he got the tar whipped out of him, and then got knocked out cold.

He'd come alive, sick as a poisoned pup from the rotgut booze. Here in jail he'd found himself charged with cold-blooded bushwhacker murder—charged with the killing of Vern Grant.

OLD MAN DIXON was a stern one—hidebound, according to Buck, the Bar D beef man. They had come up the trail together when they were both young.

Old Man Dixon had sent Jimmy, twenty-six years old, into winter exile at the line camp.

"Mebbyso you'll come out next spring with enough sense so's a man kin depend on you. Git the hell-raisin' outa your system. When I die I don't want this Bar D outfit handed down to a no-account young fool that'll throw it all away. This is your last chance. It's up to you."

All that long snowbound winter Jimmy had been chopping open water holes in the ice, shoveling hay to cattle, rawhiding back in the badlands along the river to fetch in anything that needed feeding. He took all the hard work away from Buck who was more of a father to him than Old Man Dixon had been. Those long winter evenings when the two of 'em played checkers Jimmy listened and kind of absorbed some of Buck's good horse sense.

"Don't go blamin' Hank too hard, Jimmy. You're all he's got and he wants to be proud of you. If it wasn't fer Ike Pattee you'd be runnin' the Bar D wagon two-three years ago. Mind you, boy, I ain't denyin' the fact Ike Pattee is the best all-around cowhand here.

"Ike ain't more'n ten-twelve years older'n you. But he's got drive. He's cunnin' as a curly wolf. Two years after he showed up, Hank Dixon made Ike wagon boss and he kinda pensioned me off to handle the beef herd, on the fall roundup. I ain't kickin'. I'm too old and stove-up to like them long circles. It ain't me Ike shoved aside.

"You was too young to handle the outfit when Ike taken it over. Ike's seen to it that you never got a chance to make good."

Jimmy didn't argue it with old Buck. He figured Hank had a bellyache from sour grapes. Jimmy looked back on the times when Ike had gotten him out of scrapes and softened it some before the bad news reached Hank Dixon at the home ranch. Ike was the kind of cowhand Jimmy patterned himself after. Alongside Ike, old Buck was old-fashioned and out of date, slow-gaited as a beef herd that never got out of a grazing walk.

All winter long he'd worked there—five months of snowdrifts. Then the Chinook wind cut away the snowdrifts and the ice broke up in the Missouri River, and the green grass showed up. It was time to quit the winter line camp.

Buck and Jimmy had drifted their wintered cattle up through the badlands onto the rolling open country that was the Bar D summer range. When they turned their cattle loose, old Buck headed for Alkali, leading his bed horse.

Jimmy was halfway to the home ranch

—feeling almighty virtuous and anxious to see the look in his father's eyes when he showed up with his good record—when he had sighted Ike Pattee. He hadn't seen Ike in five months.

Ike hoorawed about his winter's growth of beard and frostbit scars. That was how Hank would want to see Jimmy, looking for all the world like a sheep-herder a-horseback.

"There's a dance in town. Too bad you can't make 'er, Jimmy. Vern Grant's shore a-buildin' to that girl of yourn. He was makin' time while you was snowed in all winter. Vern's takin' the Widder Smith's daughter Ida to the dance.

"But you know Hank. Sot in his ways. He's expectin' you to show up thisaway at the home ranch. If you should take a notion to look in on that dance, take 'er easy, Jimmy. Ted and Burt Grant will do their damndest to keep you cut back while Vern is cuttin' the fancy pigeon wing with Ida.

"Them Grant boys sticks together. I won't be there to keep Ted and Burt off your back while you're whippin' Vern for cuttin' you out with Ida. I'm makin' the rounds of the winter line camps. So long, Jimmy. Don't do nothin' to git Hank down on you."

Ike had hardly ridden out of sight before Jimmy swung off from the trail to the Bar D home ranch. It was dark when he reached Alkali. He'd bought a change of clothes at the store and got a hot bath and the works at the barber shop. Somebody had a bottle. When Jimmy showed up late at the dance he was half drunk and smelling of bay rum. And he was looking for trouble like it was an old friend a long time away.

Never had little red-headed Ida Smith looked any prettier. The Widder Smith had the millinery and dress shop and always dressed her daughter prettier than any other girl in town. Ida was waltzing with tall slim Vern Grant, and she was looking up into his eyes and laughing. That tore it.

Jimmy was almost short—five feet seven, husky, bowlegged, with wiry red hair and freckles and gray-green eyes, blunt features. He could handle himself in a fight.

Sober, he would never have shoved in

that way. He had grabbed the back of Vern's heavy shirt and yanked him away.

"Winter's over. Git back to your band of sheep, Vern."

The Grant brothers ran a big sheep outfit. But they did run cattle and horses on a part of their range.

Ida had let out a shrill brittle sound that was part scream, part giggle. She was a flirt who liked to keep all the young men she could off-balance. To have 'em fight over her was part of her stock in trade. The Widder Smith would marry her one day to the son of some big outfit that had big money behind it.

Vern had whirled and swung. Jimmy had knocked him down. Teddy and Burt had horned in and taken the fight outside. It was dark and the crowd was tipsy. It had been a one-sided knockdown, and Jimmy hadn't had a fighting chance. He'd been knocked down as fast as he could get up onto his feet. And then somebody had gotten him away from there.

He remembered being sick. Somebody had fed him booze to settle his stomach, and handed him his six-shooter. They'd told him to stay there till the three Grant boys came along. Then they'd fog the hell outa that sheepherder outfit. Not kill nobody, just scare hell outa them Grant boys.

There had been some shooting. Sitting there on the edge of his jail bunk Jimmy remembered there had been some guns going off in the night. He might have done some of the shooting. He'd been too drunk to know what was really going on.

This was one jackpot, he told himself bitterly. Even Ike couldn't get him out of it. And Old Man Hank would disown him.

Chapter II

THIS IS A BUST-OUT!

BIG IKE had ridden to the Bar D home ranch. Sometime around midnight he had wakened Old Man Dixon from a sound sleep and had broken the bad news to him.

"Git your clothes on, Hank. You got to go to town. Jimmy's got hisself into a bad jackpot. He killed young Vern Grant. It'll take more than your checkbook to pry him outa this scrape."

The big ramrod stood back from the

lamplight, hiding the grin of satisfaction in his gray eyes. Ike was playing for big stakes, and he was playing for keeps.

Once Old Man Dixon had cussed the pent-up anger out of his system, he felt sick inside. He rode along through the night with his ramrod like a man riding to his own funeral. Daybreak showed the grayness of his leathery skin and the bleak look in his puckered green eyes. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. It wasn't the taste of booze, because Old Man Dixon prided himself on his abstinence.

"My father died of the drunken horrors," he'd explain. "I never touch the damned stuff. Where other cowhands used to squander their wages on booze and gamblin', I saved mine. Take a look at Buck Bell. Me'n Buck come to Montana with the same trail herd, a couple of bald-faced kids. Buck blowed his wages in on booze. I saved every dollar I made. Buck is still workin' for the Bar D for wages."

But Old Man Dixon had respect for a man who could take a drink and let it alone—like Ike. He'd point out how Ike was smart thataway. Ike would pretend to take drink for drink when there was a deal on that called for the bottle. When the deal was clinched Ike would still be cold sober. The other man would be drunk. Ike would come away with the winning end of the deal.

That took brains and cunning, and it made Ike a valuable man. If the deal had been shady and his enemies had branded Ike as a crooked trader, Old Man Dixon had a deaf ear and a blind side.

Buck had lost his wagon boss job to Ike. Buck had none of Ike's shrewdness. Buck was one of the best cowmen on earth. When he ran the Bar D wagon there wasn't a man in the outfit wouldn't foller old Buck from early breakfast to hell. The reps from other outfits swore by Buck because he was honest. Easy going, soft spoken, Buck had dealt square and he'd gotten a square deal. And that was a damnsight more than any man ever got from Ike when Old Man Dixon handed the Bar D outfit over to him to ramrod.

But Ike had the guts to back his high-handed play. Gradually he had culled out

the old hands who had worked for Buck, replacing them with younger, tougher cowhands who took Ike's orders for fighting wages.

Even the big Grant sheep outfit had gotten along with Buck. Vance Grant had moved sheep into the cow country years ago. Buck had ridden alone to the Grant home ranch. He and Vance had nibbled at a jug together, set their boundary lines, shook hands on a deal that neither outfit had ever violated while Buck ran the Bar D outfit.

The trouble commenced when Ike took over. It had grown uglier each year. Time had been when Jimmy and the Grant boys had gone to school together. Jimmy was the first to champion little pigtailed Mary Grant, who was younger than the boys.

Ike had put an end to all that. He'd poisoned it with slow poison. What had been friendship among the youngsters grew with their growing youth into a sheep-and-cattle feud. Jimmy fought the towheaded Grant boys when they met in town. It had been a long time since Jimmy had seen Mary Grant.

Mary kept house now for her father who was growing blind. And her older brothers had fetched home bitter tales concerning Ike and Jimmy.

OLD MAN DIXON was wrapped in black bitter thought. He had never packed a gun, for the same reason he had never touched whiskey. A six-shooter, like a bottle of booze, got a man into trouble.

Jimmy was in jail charged with murder because of a six-shooter and a bottle of booze. And Old Man Dixon's bitter cup was filled and spilling over. A man had to stand by his only flesh-and-blood son.

That was what Old Man Dixon was preparing to do now as he rode into Alkali. He did not go near the jail. He wasn't in any frame of mind to visit his wayward son. There would be only bitterness in that meeting. Old Man Dixon never excused himself; never let any man get away with an excuse for failure of any kind.

He and Ike stabled their horses. The grizzled cowman headed straight for his lawyer's office. Ike went along.

When the outer door opened and Jimmy heard the muffled sound of voices he stood up. Then he felt weak-kneed, and a hotness crept up into his battered face.

It was Mary Grant. She was about Jimmy's height now—tawny haired, her eyes a dark blue. A tight-cornered, pitiful smile was on her lips. Her hand gripped the big hand of her big rawboned blind father.

A deputy unlocked the door of the cell. The sightless eyes of the big sheepman were sky-blue, and the old smile Jimmy remembered seemed to be there in those blind eyes. He was holding out his right hand in a groping gesture.

"They lie, Jimmy." Grant's voice was deep-toned and mellow and kindly. "You did not kill my boy, Vern."

Jimmy wanted to bawl. He had to keep swallowing the hard aching lump in his throat. Squinting his eyes that were battered to slits, he took the blind man's hand; felt its big strong grip.

"If I did," Jimmy's voice was a harsh husky whisper, "I want to be hung. I was drunk. So drunk I can't remember."

"You did not kill my son."

Jimmy looked past the man, and met the eyes of Mary Grant. In their grief-shadowed depths was none of her father's mercy. She looked at him coldly, without accusation, but without mercy. In the eyes of Mary, Jimmy was on trial. Let the proven facts condemn Jimmy or free him.

But condemned or freed, she was through with him. He had killed their childhood friendship. Mary was loyal to her brothers. The Grant boys had long ago branded Jimmy an enemy.

Mary was here because she had to lead her father. She made that plain, and without a spoken word, she showed that she shared none of her father's generosity of heart.

"I wanted you to know, Jimmy." The gray-haired sheepman let go of Jimmy's hand. "I will talk to your father. Two wrongs never made a right. If my belief will give you courage, Jimmy, take it."

Mary Grant led her father away. Until the jailer returned the cell door was partly open. Mary had left it open, and when she did she had given Jimmy a steady look that might have meant anything.

Jimmy sat down on the edge of his bunk and stared at the open cell door. Finally the pot bellied jailer returned. With him came Buck. Old Buck made sounds like a whipped bull on the prod. His puckered eyes were a little bloodshot, but hard and bright and blue.

Buck had the muzzle of his long barreled six-shooter prodding the broad back of the paunchy jailer, who was called Tub o' Guts. One of Tub's chores was to keep the jail clean, and look after the needs of any luckless prisoners. Tub had the jail keys but no law badge, and he kept telling Buck to take the gun out of his back.

"You damned drunk' ol' bonehead! You want Jimmy out, all right, he gits out, an' no fu'ther argument. All that big bulldozer Marshal Fred Udell kin do is fire me an' that'd be doin' me a favor. I'm sick of moppin' up after drunks. Next 'un pukes on my clean floor I'll rub 'is damn' nose in it. Two-thirds of these overnight drunk jailbirds ain't house-broke.

"Hellamighty, Buck, take that smoke-pole outa my backbone. What's your beef? Can't you see Jimmy's cell door is open a'ready? There just ain't no way of reasonin' with a thing like you when you got a skinful of likker, Buck. Another thing. You ain't never paid me for that quart I fetched you last time Marshal Udell throwed you in the cooler to sober up."

"Pint." Buck snorted. "You two-bit crook. You politicians is all tarred with the same brush. A pint of Injun rotgot I couldn't hold down on my stummick, it was that rank. And you'd nick me fer the price of a quart of bonded likker. I told you I'd vote fer you if ever you run fer town marshal. I swapped you my vote fer that pint of panther spit. Now open up this calaboose wide, on the legal demand of a votin' citizen. And may the howlin' wolves never cease!"

Buck was chewing the ragged end of his tobacco-stained mustache. His faded blue eyes blinked wickedly. He had been barbed and scrubbed, and he gave off the odor of barbershop and saloon and barn. His new Stetson hat was yanked down at a jack-deuce angle. His eyes were full of hell and vinegar.

"Grab your hat, son," Buck told Jimmy. "This is a jail delivery."

Chapter III

LAW ON THE PROD

THERE were times when Buck declared himself. When he did, it behooved a man to let him alone. When he began blinking fast and tiny sparks kindled in his faded blue eyes, when his soft quiet voice creaked like a rusty hinge—then it was wise to step aside and let that little old warthog go by. Buck feared nothing on earth, and no man stood big enough to block his way. Five-feet-five with his boots on, the time had been when Buck would tackle any man alive. He was a wildcat to whip. He still had that fighting heart in his stove-up shell.

It was broad daylight when Buck rode to the jail, leading Jimmy's saddled horse. Saddle carbines in scabbards hung on both saddles.

It was broad daylight when Buck made his one-man jail delivery. Then he and Jimmy rode out of Alkali, Montana, right down the dusty main street in plain view of friends and enemies. The town was filled with men from the Grant outfit and the Bar D outfit. Men stood on the wide plank sidewalks and stared. Faces peered from behind saloon and store and barber-shop. Not a man had the guts to make a move.

Old Man Dixon and his lawyer and Ike stared from the window of the lawyer's office. The white-collared lawyer shrugged and smiled thinly and said something about the case being taken out of his hands.

"That drunken old fool!" Ike's handsome face went livid with fury. "What in hell does he and Jimmy think they're gettin' away with?" His hand dropped to the ivory butt of his holstered six-shooter.

Old Man Dixon was standing a little behind his ramrod. If a man could have read the grizzled cowman's mind right then, he would have been astounded and perhaps as bewildered as Old Man Dixon himself.

For the first time in his life this self-made cattleman realized he was a failure. It was like a dull rusty knife driven deep

into his heart, and twisted slowly there.

There beside his son rode Buck Bell, cowpuncher, who had squandered his wages and had nothing on earth to show for his sixty years of cowpunching but a private saddle horse and saddle and bed-roll and an old warsack. That little old cowhand was more of a real father to Jimmy than Old Man Dixon had ever been. There rode little old Buck who had all the real courage Almighty God could give a man. Alongside him rode Jimmy, a reckless grin on his battered face. He rode straight-backed and with the same kind of straightforward courage that was in old Buck's prideful bearing.

Old Man Dixon felt proud of Buck, proud of his wild son. By that same token he was for the first time in his life ashamed of himself—ashamed of his failure as a father. Ashamed of the disloyalty he had betrayed when he had shoved Buck into the culls to give his job to Ike Pattee.

"You're fired, Pattee," Old Man Dixon, giving voice to his thoughts, spoke so quietly that it took a long moment for the gist of his toneless statement to penetrate Ike's cold fury. Even then, the big tough Bar D ramrod couldn't believe what his ears had heard.

"Huh?"

"Figure it out," said Old Man Dixon in that same toneless voice. "It's what you've got comin'. The Bar D don't need you no longer."

"What the hell is this?"

"You want it in writin', my lawyer here kin draw it up. Give him that Bar D checkbook you pack."

"What the hell? You can't do this to me. You gone locoed?"

But Ike read something in the puckered green eyes of the grizzled cowman that told him his game was up. It was a gut-shot.

The blood drained from Ike's face, leaving it a muddy color. His pale gray eyes had the look of murder. His hand was still on his gun, and its grip was cold-sweated. His voice came in a rasping whisper.

"No man on earth kin do this to Ike Pattee and not git paid back double. Before I'm done with you and your Bar D, you'll be shore sorry for yourself. And for that Jimmy whelp of yourn. And that

damned ol' Buck Bell will be wishin' he'd bin born dead. You fired me. All right. I'm takin' my cowpunchers with me. What we'll do to you and your Bar D outfit will be a-plenty."

"You've already done your damage, Pattee. Anything you kin do from now on will be in my favor. You're a sorry loser, Ike. Hand the lawyer that Bar D checkbook and git out. Git yourself a cryin' towel at the Mercantile. But don't put it on the Bar D account. Git out. The sight of you is gittin' a little sickenin'."

WHEN Ike had gone, slamming the door behind him, Hank Dixon forced a grin. He asked the lawyer if he kept a bottle here in his office.

"There's a bad taste in my mouth," he said when the lawyer took a bottle and two clean glasses from his desk. "Nothing but whiskey kin wash it away."

Down the street in front of the hotel, Vance Grant stood with his daughter Mary and his sons Burt and Ted. Mary and her two older brothers were staring at Jimmy and little old Buck as they rode past at a running walk. The blind man sensed the tension.

"What is it, Mary?" he asked in his quiet voice.

"It's Jimmy Dixon." Ted Grant's voice was tight, tense, dangerous. "Buck Bell's with him. Somebody's let Jimmy outa jail. What do you make of that, Burt?"

"I'll check that right back to you, Ted. We lettin' 'em git away with murder?"

"Jimmy Dixon," said their father, "is not the man who shot Vern. Buck knows what he's doing. Don't make any mistake, boys, that you will regret with shame afterwards. A blind man sees things your eyes cannot see. I've lost my youngest son, but I hope to gain another by Vern's death."

Vance Grant's groping hand found the hand of his daughter. It felt cold and he warmed it in his hand. A slow smile softened the lines of his face.

Standing there, the Grants watched Jimmy and Buck ride past. Neither of the riders so much as cut a sidelong glance at the blind sheepman and his daughter and his two sons.

Down the street and across from the

hotel the Widder Smith and her daughter Ida looked out through the window of the dressmaking and millinery shop.

The Widder Smith was a small, tight-corseted woman who kept her thick hair dyed to its original dark Chestnut color to hide the gray hairs. She dressed always in black. There were times when she forgot, and then her voice lost its purr and took on a sharp waspish tone.

"It looks to me like you've lost out all around, Ida. I told you to set your cap for whichever one you wanted. There goes Jimmy Dixon and so far as you're concerned he's gone for good. And the Grants blame you for whatever happened to young Vern. Even if Ted or Burt wanted to marry you, that sister of theirs would step in and ruin your chances. Or Vance himself would put a stop to it. After all the trouble I've gone to, the sacrifices I've made to fit you for—"

"—Even to the price tag." Ida's voice matched her mother's.

"Even to the price tag. Now you've marked it down. Bargain counter, now."

"My father was a gambling man," Ida said with bitter pride. "I've got some of his gambler's blood. You think I want to be tied to a young wild fool like Jimmy Dixon? Or that I ever gave Vern a serious thought? When I marry, it will be a man, not a half-baked kid. I'm marrying a man that knows what he wants and knows how to get it. Ike Pattee will own the Bar D, and when he gets it he'll go after the Grant outfit. He'll take it, too. Ike Pattee is playing for high stakes and he plays for keeps."

Color flooded the cheeks of Ida Smith and her brown eyes looked black now, black and glittering—the eyes of a woman gambler.

The Widder Smith and her daughter Ida saw Ike Pattee come out of the lawyer's office, slamming the door. He was headed for the saloon across the street. He strode now like a man who was in some kind of hurry. Gone was all his swagger, and he walked with his hands clenched. There went a man who could smile only when he was winning. The odds were down, and now he'd stop at nothing. Any girl who married Ike Pattee would have to travel his way or be left behind.

Ida Smith pointed at Ike and her smile

was cold and cruel, and it glittered there in her dark eyes. She was too young to see what her mother saw.

"Your father, Keno Smith," said the Widder Smith coldly, "called himself a gambling man. But he was no more than a tinhorn. I found that out after you were born. He left me behind with a baby to raise. Deserted me. He was killed later when some man caught him dealing from a marked deck. I shed no tears for Keno Smith. And I'd rather see you dead than married to Ike Pattee."

IDA was watching Ike as he shouldered his way through the swinging doors of the saloon where the Bar D cowhands were standing. A smile was on her red-lipped mouth, and the smile reflected in the dark glitter of her eyes.

The Widder Smith idolized this pretty daughter of hers. She had lavished everything she had on her daughter—pampered her, spoiled her. Never had she lifted a hand to punish her. That was why it came so unexpectedly now—the bitter disappointment, and the nameless dread.

The Widder Smith slapped her daughter Ida across the face. The sound of it was loud there in the little millinery and dressmaking shop. It was a hard slap, and it sent the girl staggering off balance. Ida tripped and stumbled and fell. She lay there in a crumpled heap. Then her mother was down on her knees, and had her daughter in her arms and was clinging to her. Sobs were torn from her throat, and then the tears came in a flood, and Ida was sobbing too like a badly frightened child.

I'll kill that man. I'll kill Ike Pattee.

But the Widder Smith was not saying it aloud. She was saying it over and over to herself.

Ida was frightened now and fear made her a small child sobbing in the protection of her mother's arms.

"I'm scared, Mama. I'm scared. I've got to tell you. I know who killed Vern Grant. It wasn't Jimmy. It was—I'm too scared, mama, to tell even you. Scared."

The Widder Smith blinked the last tear from her eyes, and now they were dry and cold and calculating. She held her daughter Ida's head down against her bosom and stroked the girl's hair. But her

eyes stayed dry and cold and calculating.

"You tell mama everything, baby, everything. I'll never let anyone or anything harm or hurt my baby. Tell mama."

Ida Smith left nothing untold. The Widder Smith listened to every word and she was remembering it all and recording it there in her memory, word for word. When the time came, she could repeat it. Something of the fear that iced her heart was melting, and she could find something in the way of hope again for the happiness of her daughter.

It must have been quite a long time later when somebody rapped on the locked door of the shop. The Widder Smith shoved her daughter through the doorway into their living quarters at the rear of the store. She patted her hair into place and smoothed her black dress and unbolted the door.

Town Marshal Fred Udell stood there—tall, lean, homely, a worried look in his hazel eyes. Fred Udell was a good cowhand but he wasn't much of a peace officer. He pulled his hat from his sweat-matted brown hair and grinned uncertainly.

"I—I figgered mebby Ida was here, and I kinda dropped by to say hello. I mean I'm pulling out after Jimmy Dixon and Buck Bell and I kinda wanted to tell Ida goodbye till I got back."

"Ida isn't feeling too well, Fred. I made her lie down."

The Widder Smith did not ask Marshal Udell to come in. Instead, she eased herself outside and closed the door quietly.

"Put on your hat." She smiled and made a little joke of it. "You'd catch your death of cold. Jimmy Dixon didn't kill Vern Grant. Don't crowd his trail. Make believe you're going after Jimmy and Buck. Stall until dark. Then ride back to town but don't let anybody see you. I'll leave the back door open. I'll be waiting. So will Ida. You love my daughter Ida, don't you Fred?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're a good man, Fred." The Widder Smith took hold of his hand and held onto it.

"Keep this secret, Fred. I know who killed Vern Grant. I'll pass it along to you tonight for what it's worth. But don't you repeat a word of this."

"It's a promise, ma'am."

MARSHAL Udell was too easy-going and backward to be town marshal at Alkali. He hadn't asked for the job in the first place. He had an outfit of his own not far from town. Until Ida Smith had roped, throwed and hogtied him with no more than a wink and a smile, he'd never had much ambition beyond his little ranch. But a girl like Ida prodded a man into wanting the world to spread out at her feet. A law badge sort of added to a man's stature in the cow country, and made him an admired figure.

"You don't need to move into town." It was Ike Pattee who had got the nickel-plated law badge pinned on Fred Udell. "Your place is close enough. The job don't pay much but it might lead to some-thin' better. Alkali needs a town marshal a man like you, that can't be scared or bluffed out or bought off. You're the man for that job, Fred." Ike had turned over his ace in the hole.

"It was Ida Smith that mentioned you for the job, Fred." Ike had poked him in the ribs. "Looks like the Widder Smith's daughter wants you to git ahead in the world. Nothin' ketches a girl's eye quicker than a law badge."

That clinched it. Ike and Ida had gotten quite a laugh out of it later. "I need that boneheaded country boy in my business, Ida. String 'im along. Don't lay it on too thick. We don't want him to get wise. I'm playin' for big stakes, honey. String along wth Ike and don't worry, you'll wear diamonds."

Even now Fred Udell, town marshal of Alkali, was too honest to suspect that he'd been used. Or that Ida laughed at his country boy honesty.

Even now, when the Widder Smith held one of his hands in both hers and told him that Jimmy Dixon was innocent—even now, Fred Udell hadn't enough cunning in his makeup to get suspicious. He gave the Widder Smith his promise of silence. She gave his hand a tight squeeze, then went back inside her little shop and shut the door.

Marshal Udell went on down the street to the feed and livery barn where he had left his horse. Ike Pattee and his six or eight Bar D tough cowhands were waiting for him there—his law posse. They were saddled and armed and waiting to

follow him when he took up the trail of Jimmy Dixon.

Udell hadn't been in town the night of the ruckus at the schoolhouse dance. Ike had showed up at Udell's place while he was shaving. The Bar D ramrod had told him a bunch of stolen Bar D horses hid out at one of the Grant's sheep camps. Ike wanted to have the law along with him when he picked up those stolen horses.

It had been an all-night ride and it had netted them nothing but an open gate and horse tracks. When Udell got back to town, Tub had Jimmy Dixon locked up in jail. Some of Jimmy's Bar D cowhands had delivered Jimmy, dead drunk and beaten up, at the jail and told Tub to lock him up before the Grant boys strung him up for murder.

In the dusk that was darkening into nightfall, Ike and his Bar D cowhands were waiting. Every time Udell saw Ike, Ike had gathered a couple more of his cowboys.

"Rattle your hocks, Fred." Ike was a little drunk. "You want Vern Grant's murderer to git plumb outa the country?"

Chapter IV

MAY THE HOWLIN' WOLVES NEVER CEASE!

LITTLE old Buck told Jimmy to leave it to him. "When you're dealin' with a blacklaig, you got to use blacklaig tricks. Take a curly wolf like Ike Pattee. You got to out-wolf that son!"

But old Buck was taking his time about it. He kept cutting a look back across his shoulder as they rode along at a jog trot. When he sighted a lone rider following them and overtaking them, Buck nodded and muttered something, and they pulled off to one side of the wagon road. And when Old Man Dixon came riding up, crowding his horse hard, Buck acted as if that was just how he had planned it.

"About time you showed some horse sense," growled Buck when he and Jimmy rode out from behind the buckbrush to block the way. Buck's squinted eyes took in the saddle gun and six-shooter. It was the first time Old Man Nixon had ever packed a gun.

"And I wouldn't fall off my horse dead," chuckled the little old cowpuncher,

"if you was to pull a bottle on a man, Hank."

Old Man Dixon grinned a leathery grin and slid a sealed quart from one of his saddle pockets.

"To cut the phlegm, Buck."

"Next thing you know, Jimmy, this danged ol' warthawg will be actually claimin' you fer his own son."

"If Jimmy'll let me." Hank Dixon was looking at Jimmy.

"I've shore made a mess of it," said Jimmy. "And I'm goin' back to take my medicine." He turned to Buck.

Buck was nodding his grizzled head as he pried the cork from the bottle with the blade of his knife.

"Shore we're a-goin' back. Who in hell said we wasn't goin' back? I bin tryin' to tell you we was out-wolfin' Ike Pattee. We're takin' the horseback ride to air the jail stink off you. We'll circle back to town after dark. How'd you manage to give that big ramrod of yourn the slip, Hank?"

"I fired him about the time the two of you was ridin' down the street. Pattee has gathered the Bar B cowhands for a posse. He's talked Ted and Burt into throwin' in with the posse. Ike has Marshal Udell eatin' outa his dirty hand. There's bound to be shootin', Buck. The odds is that many against us. For the first time in my life I'm sorry I ever learned how to shoot a gun."

"All you do is point 'er" said Buck, "and pull the trigger. You run into Vance Grant before you left town?"

"Vance and Mary are at the hotel. First time I ever had pity on a sheepman—blind, one son killed, the other two boys turned ag'in him. Vance says Jimmy never killed his son. But Ted and Burt claim Jimmy is guilty. They wasn't there, but that's how they heard it. Ike Pattee has 'em talked into believin' he kin prove Jimmy killed Vern. Ike is an almighty convincin' damned liar."

"You're the man should know." Buck was still on the prod and couldn't help looking at Old Man Dixon.

When he got the cork out, he handed the bottle to Hank Dixon and the old man grinned and tilted the bottle and took a quick swallow. When he choked on the

raw whiskey Buck took the bottle. He said it was a waste of good likker.

Buck shoved the bottle at Jimmy and said it was hair of the hydrophobia skunk that had bit him. Jimmy shook his head and grinned.

"I put myself on the Injun list, Buck, when I come alive in jail."

"A little late," grinned Buck, "to be pinnin' on a white ribbon. But I got a notion you'll hold yourself to it." He tilted the bottle and swallowed.

Old Man Nixon was trying to think up a way of telling Buck that he had his old ramrod job back. Buck read his thoughts and let Hank stew in his own broth.

"Now that I'm back ramroddin' the Bar D," Buck finally put Old Man Dixon out of his misery, "I'm handin' it over to Jimmy."

"No argument, Buck," said Old Man Dixon. "It's Jimmy's outfit."

"Big-hearted of you both. And me with a hangman's noose around his neck."

"We're cuttin' that rope tonight," said Buck. "With a little gunfire."

BUCK said it was time they commenced leavin' some plain sign for the law posse to pick up and foller on a wide circle back to town. He headed straight for Udell's little ranch near Alkali.

"They'll stop there at Udell's place," Buck had it figured out. "Since he pinned that tin badge on Udell, Ike has made Fred's place his town headquarters. That doggoned Fred Udell—Golden Rule Fred. But the devil have mercy on Mister Ike Pattee if ever that same slow Fred Udell gits his eyes open and knows fer certain that Ike has bin usin' him and his law badge to cover Ike's snake tracks. Them quiet fellers is the worst to handle if ever they git their dander up."

They left a plain trail to the Udell place. They cooked and ate supper there, and at Buck's suggestion they broke the unwritten law of the cow country and left their dirty dishes. Before they pulled out Buck wrote a note and left it on the kitchen table.

"To Them It Concerns:" read the note written with cartridge lead on a piece of wrapping paper. "You want Jimmy Dixon. You kin find Jimmy back at Alkali. And he ain't alone. Hank Dixon and

Buck Bell is with him. We won't be hard to find if you got the guts to foller our trail back to town.

"If Ted and Burt Grant is with you they better turn bunch quitters right now and believe what their blind father told 'em. And if Fred Udell wants the man that had Vern Grant murdered, he kin spit on Ike Pattee and he's spit on the guilty man.

"Your place looks shore run down, Fred. Why don't you throw away that tin star you bin lettin' Ike Pattee hide behind and look after your outfit? Mebbe so the Widder Smith's daughter Ida will quit laughin' at you then when her and that spur-jinglin' Ike gits together.

"All right, Pattee. You bragged you was takin' the Bar D outfit. Hank and Jimmy Dixon and Buck Bell is holdin' onto it. Come on to Alkali and take it away from us. And may the howlin' wolves never cease!"

Buck Bell was grinning wickedly when he weighted down the message with the soft nosed .45 bullet he'd used for a pencil.

IT WAS an hour or more after night-fall when the three of them rode back to Alkali. They stabled their horses and Buck got the news from the barn man.

The barn man said that there were about a dozen in the posse Fred Udell and Ike Pattee had led out of town and that included the two Grant brothers. But after the posse had pulled out, some more of Ike Pattee's tough cowhands had filtered into town and stayed long enough to pick up a town bottle. Then they had pulled out again and the barn man had overheard them say they were meeting Ike at Fred Udell's place.

"Two of 'em just slipped outa town, Buck. That was when they sighted you three fellers and recognized you. They're takin' the news to Ike Pattee."

Buck said that was how he wanted it. Buck was ramrodding this now and he went at it as if he knew what he was doing.

"Hank, you mosey on down the street to the hotel. Tell Vance Grant not to worry about Ted and Burt. Them two sons of his went along to learn what there might be to learn. They got every reason

on earth to hate Ike Pattee's guts. But they're lettin' him have his way. You stick close to that blind sheepman, Hank."

Buck took Jimmy along. He rapped on the front door of the Widder Smith's dressmaking and millinery shop until she slid back the bolt and opened the door.

"Take your daughter," Buck's voice was sharp-edged, "and git over to the hotel. Gather up every woman and kid in town and herd 'em all into the hotel. We don't want no wimmin an' kids underfoot when the big ruckus starts. That flirty-eyed daughter of yours has caused enough trouble a'ready. Now see kin you keep her outa sight. This ain't no way to talk to a lady. I'll come around tomorrow an' beg your pardon."

He prodded Jimmy with his thumb and they went on down the street, leaving the Widder Smith standing there staring after them.

"Wasn't that Jimmy Dixon with Buck Bell, mama?" Ida's whisper sounded shrill.

"You heard what Buck said. Never mind Jimmy. You get back there and look after the only man in this cow country fool enough to marry you. How is Fred?"

"The bleeding's stopped. Should I change the bandage?"

"No. It might start the bleeding again. Get back there. Keep that door bolted. Don't open it for anybody. If Fred Udell asks you to marry him, you tell him yes. Kiss him like you mean it. It might save his life, give him something to fight for.

"I don't know what that Ike told Udell before he shot him, but it must have been the truth. Fred Udell won't believe it till he hears it from you. You'll lie to that man. For once your lying will do good instead of bad. Now get back there to the man you're going to marry if he don't die. But wait till I get out this door."

"Where you going, mama? I'm scared to be left alone. Where?"

"You won't be alone. Fred Udell is here with you. Here's Fred's gun. Use it on Ike Pattee if he tries to get in. I'm going out. Buck Bell is fighting mad. Now bolt this door. And get back to Fred Udell. He's worth saving."

The Widder Smith went down the street, a trimly corseted woman in black. She was going to gather up the women and children of the cowtown of Alkali and

herd them into the shelter of the hotel. Womanlike, the Widder Smith came to an important decision. She would throw away her hair dye and let nature take its graying course.

And she was doing it for the man who had stumbled against her back door an hour ago. When the door had opened under the impact of his weight Fred Udell had fallen there on the kitchen floor. A candle light showed his blood-sodden shirt, and his blood-stained law badge.

"Ike Pattee shot me in the back when I rode away from him. Was it Ike Pattee killed Vern Grant?"

"Ike Pattee had it done by his men."

"Ike said that him and Ida—bin makin' a joker outa Fred Udell, and that's what hurts worse than this bullet hole in my back, ma'am."

"Ike Pattee lied, Fred. Come here, Ida. Tell Fred. Then help me git him into your bed."

But Udell had gone out like a light. He looked dead when they got him onto Ida's clean bed. The Widder Smith had done a doctor's job, and Ida had helped her.

Fred Udell would want his mother-in-law to be a little gray. For him the Widder Smith played Lady Paul Revere on foot. A short time later she had every woman and child herded into the hotel.

Ike Pattee and his tough cowhands were riding up out of the moonlight night, their gun barrels glinting.

Chapter V

DEATH—MONTANA STYLE

THE cyclone prairie country had cellars to give shelter to its people when they sighted one of the big black twisters. Alkali, Montana, used its hotel to shield its womenfolks and children and gentler citizens from stray bullets when the cowboys painted the town red.

And when some roundup outfit rode from a nearby camp to buck their horses up and down the street, and holler wild, and empty their six-shooters in boisterous rollicking fun, they respected the hotel. And when some .45 furrowed its weathered false front, or happened to smash a window of its saloon or lobby, it was a clumsy blundering accident. Ornerly and

tough and wild as they might be, those cowhands had a respect for womanhood and the safety of children, and they had no desire to molest the business men of the town.

The citizens of Alkali would gather inside the hotel when the wild ki-yi-yipping of some cow outfit heralded their approach on horseback. They would watch from the hotel windows while the cowboys pitched their horses or matched races along the main street to the tune of popping six-shooters. It was all in fun. Cowboys in town.

But this was different. There was a hushed silence, a grimness to this gathering.

"Stay back from them windows," warned the quiet voice of Vance Grant. "You keep 'em back outa danger, Mary."

But the blind man stood there by the big window as if he had the eyesight to watch what went on out there on the wide dusty moonlight main street. When Mary took hold of his arm he shook off her grip almost roughly. She forced a white-lipped smile because she understood.

Somewhere out in the night were his two sons. If they were killed, the blind sheepman would welcome any bullet. No need to worry about his daughter Mary. His death would release the girl from her self-imposed bondage to his blindness.

Old Man Dixon had left the hotel. Buck and Jimmy had stopped in there a while ago. Buck had motioned with his head, and Hank Dixon had left the hotel with them.

"I'm goin' with Buck and my boy Jimmy, Vance," Old Man Dixon had spoken in a barely audible voice. "Buck's kinda bossin' this thing. Not that I'm worth a hoot in hell with a gun, but—"

"Tell Buck an' Jimmy to keep an eye out for my two boys, Hank."

"You bet. Ted and Burt are good boys."

Jimmy Dixon still wore the blood-stained marks of the beating he'd taken. A six-shooter was buckled on and a saddle carbine hung in the crook of his arm as he stood in the doorway watching the deserted street. He stiffened and his head turned. A quick flush reddened his bruised face because he thought it was Mary Grant. But it was the Widder Smith. Her

hand tightened on his sleeve. When she spoke her voice was low-toned and there was a pleading look in her brown eyes.

"You're a headstrong boy, Jimmy. Prideful. You just swallow some of that high-chinned pride and come along with me. There's a mighty fine gal needs all the comfort and love you can spare her."

For a moment Jimmy thought she meant Ida. Then she turned him away from the door and he felt like a big overgrown schoolboy being led by the teacher's grip on an ear. He was facing Mary Grant.

"Anything might happen before this night is over," said the Widder Smith. "Before Jimmy leaves here, you two kiss and make up. If you were ever foolish enough to think for a minute that Jimmy had anything to do with the killing of your brother Vern, forget it, Mary. Ike Pattee put up a five hundred dollar bounty to go to the man or men who killed Vern Grant.

"His tough cowhands drew straws to see who would do that job of murder. Ike Pattee was a long ways off when it happened, and he took Fred Udell along with him to prove an alibi. Ike wants to be a cattle king. He's after both the Bar D and the Grant outfit. He's ribbed the feud between the sheep and cattle outfits. I've told Hank Dixon the facts, as I got them from my daughter Ida.

"Fred Udell is over at my shop, badly wounded. Dying, maybe. Ike shot him when Fred found out the truth. Ida's nursing Fred Udell. And I'm going over there now to stay with them. Now you two quit acting like spoiled kids, and kiss and make up."

JIMMY saw tears well in the eyes of Mary Grant, and he took her in his arms and kissed her. Her cold stiff lips melted and clung to his.

Old Man Dixon poked Vance Grant. "Looky yonder, Vance. My Jimmy and your Mary. There'll be a weddin' when the dust settles."

He'd forgotten in his excitement that the sheepman was blind. But Vance Grant needed no eyes. He had heard the quick choked sob that came from the throat of his daughter Mary. The blind man smiled.

Then Buck had taken Jimmy and Old Man Dixon along. They had escorted the

Widder Smith across the street. She had rapped on the door of her shop, and Ida had opened it.

"Fred just told me he was going to live, mama," Ida said. "We're going to get married as soon as he's on his feet again."

Then Buck and Old Man Dixon and Jimmy had gone down the street to the feed and livery barn. Not a light showed in town, not even in the row of saloons. In those darkened saloons were men armed with guns, and as the three walked past, Buck would call out in a flat-toned voice.

"You know what's a-comin'. Don't go to sleep. When you hear me holler, give 'em hell. But don't bust a cap till you hear ol' Buck holler."

When they reached the dark barn they led their saddled horses from the stalls and tightened their saddle cinches. They mounted in silence and waited there inside the dark barn. The waiting was beginning to get raw-edged when they sighted the men on horseback.

There was no way of getting an accurate count. They spurred their horses to a run when they reached the main street. Their wild, whiskey-drunk yells shattered the silence of the night. Then they charged down the moonlit deserted street of Alkali, and their guns spat jets of flame and their bullets raked both sides of the street, shattering the windows of the cowtown's dozen saloons.

Yelling and shooting they rode up the street and back again—shooting and yelling and spurring their horses. Not an answering shot came from anywhere in the deserted town. When no gunfire took up the challenge of their wanton shooting they milled around.

"Where the hell is Ike Pattee?" a drunken bellow asked.

Others took it up, hollering Ike Pattee's name. They seemed bewildered and confused and uncertain now without the leadership of big tough Ike Pattee.

"Where the hell is them Grant boys?" another tipsy voice yelled now. "Hey, you two sheepherder sons! Where you gone to? Where's Ike?"

A winded Tub of Guts came lumbering into the barn by the back way. Tub was blowing, winded, wheezing. His voice was hoarse with tense excitement.

"Pattee's in jail. The Grant boys

threw him in! They told me to lock the door an' give Jimmy Dixon the key! I got Ike Pattee on ice. You told me to hold down the jail, Buck—and I done it!"

"Don't blow yourself down, Tub." Little old Buck was chuckling. "You're wheezin' like a winded Missouri mule. Give Jimmy the jail key. Did the Grant boys leave Ike Pattee his guns?"

"They drewed his snake fangs. Ted Grant gimme Ike's iv'ry handled six-shooter. They said to hand it over to Jimmy Dixon along with the jail key. Then they rode off. They're circlin' around to come down the far end of the street. I told 'em you'd be here at the barn, Buck. They said them Bar D tough cowhands drewed straws to see who'd murder their kid brother Vern. They was wipin' out the whole damned outfit to make shore-certain they got their kid brother's killer."

"You done earned your town marshal badge, Tub," said Buck. "You'll find a jug in the saddle room. Just bed down there with the jug, and take 'er easy. You shore got the makin's of a first class town marshal, Tub. Pot-gutted and wind-broke. Them's the qualifications fer a first rate politician. Take 'er easy, Tub."

Buck Bell eased his horse to the dark doorway of the barn, tilted his head towards the big lopsided moon that rode the sky. And then he lifted his voice to a wild wailing warcry:

"May the howlin' wolves never cease!"

When his shout reached the far end of the street all hell tore loose from its hot hinges. Guns spat fire from the darkened saloons. The two Grant brothers echoed the shout as they spurred into sight at the far end of the wide dusty moonlit street.

Buck and Old Man Dixon and Jimmy rode out into sight, their saddle guns blazing. The two Grant boys came from the other end of the street.

Ike Pattee's cowhands were trapped. But Ike was paying them fighting wages, and they were playing out their strings.

They were out-fought from the start. But while that wild melee lasted they fought like men who had the bulge, and some of them rode into the open doors of the saloons with their guns blazing, and others charged down both ends of the

street to shoot their way out of town. There was no escape. Both ends of the street were blocked. Those who tried to ride in between the saloons and store buildings were cut down. The night was filled with the hideous din of gunfire and cursing men on horseback.

And then the wild ruckus was over. The gunfire died out. The wild yelling dwindled down to the moans and groans of dying men.

"And may the howlin' wolves never cease!"

Buck Bell's shout lost its saw-edged wildness. His grin was flat-lipped when he squinted at Old Man Dixon. "You all right, Hank?"

"I'll live." Old Man Dixon was cussing a bullet rip in his shoulder.

"Git yourself patched up at the hotel," said Buck Bell. "The Doc's there with the wimminfolks. And throw that gun away. You don't need it no more."

Then Buck turned to Jimmy Dixon. "How'd you make out, Jimmy?"

"Nary a scratch, Buck."

"Then let's go. No use keepin' Ike Pattee waitin'."

Chapter VI

THREE DAMNED BIG MEN

THIS is the way it had to be, although nobody had put it into that many words. Jimmy Dixon had no strong stomach for it. But he knew that it was his job and that it was up to him. He wasn't afraid. He told himself that he wasn't scared of Ike Pattee. But inside he felt cold. His skin was clammy with cold sweat and the ivory butt of Ike's gun felt slick and slimy in his hands.

Little Buck Swore as they rode at a running walk towards the jail at the edge of town: "I'd be proud to take it off your hands, Jimmy."

"Nope."

"Remember this. Ike Pattee is a killer, a fast gun slinger. You ain't. Nobody but a damned fool would give a man like Ike Pattee an even break."

Jimmy forced a grin. "You tellin' me to murder a man, Buck?"

"Forget it. What the hell. Just don't go playin' the hero. Take the bulge, and don't miss. Would a quick swaller help?" Buck

pulled the bottle he'd taken from Old Man Dixon.

"Nope."

Buck pulled the cork and drank. Then he corked the bottle. They were nearing the jail when Ted and Burt loped up. Both were cussing slight flesh wounds. They grinned at Jimmy and Buck.

"Why don't we give Ike Pattee a law trial?" one of the Grant boys asked. "No use your riskin' your hide, Jimmy. You got too much of a raw deal already."

"Let's find out what Ike Pattee has to say about it," said Jimmy.

They pulled up at the log cabin jail. Jimmy dismounted. He fitted the big key into the lock of the heavy plank door and turned it and shoved open the door. It was pitch dark inside. There was no sign or indication of anybody inside.

"Come on out, Ike." Jimmy stood in the doorway. He had a gun in each hand. "Here's your gun, Ike. It'll be me or you if that's how you want it. Or you kin stand trial for the murder of Vern Grant and take your chances with the law."

No answer came from the darkness inside the jail. Jimmy sensed danger. He didn't know what it was, until he heard the sharp metallic click-click of a six-shooter hammer being thumbed back to full cock there in the dark jail. Then out of that heavy blackness came the voice of Ike Pattee—flat-toned, tense, deadly.

"Stand where you are, damn you! Drop both them guns. I got the deal. I'm holdin' all the aces—six of 'em. All of 'em .45 slugs. I'm in the dark. I kind drop you in your tracks. I kin kill Buck Bell and them two sheepherder Grants without wastin' a bullet. You all hear me? Then throw away your guns. Or I'm gut-shootin' Jimmy Dixon. I'm playin' for keeps. I've always had a gun hid here inside this jail—just in case. This is it. I said throw away your guns, you sons! Or I'll gut-shoot Jimmy Dixon where he stands!"

Jimmy stood braced on widespread legs, tense as a coiled rattler. He had that ivory handled six-shooter gripped by its barrel, and at the first sound of that flat-toned voice Jimmy had lifted both hands to the level of his shoulders. He held his own gun with his thumb on the hammer, ready to shoot. The other gun he gripped by the barrel.

Ike Pattee's voice sounded close—not ten feet away. So close that Jimmy smelled the foul stench of Ike's whiskey breath. That voice came from directly in front.

Nothing moved but Jimmy Dixon's hand as it flipped forward at the wrist. He threw the ivory handled six-shooter as hard as he could at the sound of Ike Pattee's voice. The gun struck Pattee's face with a dull crunching sound. The sound was blotted out by the heavy explosion of

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the cocked gun held in Ike Pattee's hand.

Jimmy felt the burning thudding sting of the .45 slug that grazed his ribs. He lurched sideways. The gun in his right hand jerked down and spat fire, and he hit his human target. Ike Pattee let out a harsh snarling grunt and Jimmy jumped inside and away from the moonlit doorway. He thumbed back the hammer of his six-shooter and pulled the trigger. Pattee screamed, and then they were both shooting at the flash of each other's guns in the pitch blackness.

JIMMY dropped to a fast-moving crouch. Every time he fired a shot he sidestepped and shifted, and fired again at the flash of Ike Pattee's gun. Pattee's gun flashes came each time from the same place—from a far corner of the jail, down near the floor.

The blackness filled now with the acrid fumes of burnt gunpowder, and the log walls shut in the gun explosions. The heavy echoes blasted into the powder-smoke filled darkness until Jimmy's eardrums were deafened and he was coughing and choking on the powder-smoke. His eyes felt burnt, and he lost track of everything except that he had to kill Ike Pattee or be killed himself.

He kept thumbing back his gun hammer and pulling the trigger. He didn't know he'd emptied his six-shooter. That he was aware that the gun hammer was snapping down on empty exploded shells. The shooting was ended now, and the gun echoes had died away. Even then his deafened ears kept ringing and pounding with the gun echoes so that he couldn't hear the harmless snapping of his own empty gun.

Ike Pattee's gun was no longer spitting fire, and Jimmy slowly realized that and he had quit working his gun. He crouched there near the door, blowing like a spent runner sodden with cold sweat. He edged along the wall to the open doorway. Then he ducked low and dove headlong through the doorway and out onto the ground, rolling over and over and then scrambling up onto his feet.

"Don't shoot boys!" That was Buck's voice, and it was as harsh croaking as a black crow's. "It's Jimmy!"

The two Grant brothers went into the

jail. They made scuffling sounds inside. Then one of them called out.

"He's dead, Buck. Ike Pattee is deader'n hell."

One of them struck a match and held its flame cupped in his hand. He held the flame till it burned down the length of the match stick.

Ted and Burt came out of the dark jail and one of them shut the door on the dead body.

"That a bottle you got there, Buck?" asked one of the Grant boys.

Buck uncorked the bottle. Jimmy Dixon was the only one who did not take a big drink. He kept feeling gingerly of the bullet rip along his ribs that was wetting his flannel shirt with sticky blood. He had lost that cold feeling, and the cold sweat was drying on his hide. His eardrums hurt and he felt a little sick inside.

Then Old Man Dixon loped up. His leathery face was gray in the moonlight. He saw Jimmy alive and getting on his horse and he threw away his six-shooter as if he had hold of a hot branding iron. When Buck shoved the almost emptied quart bottle at him Old Man Dixon grabbed it and drained it and threw it away.

"Ike Pattee is dead, Hank," said Buck. "He had the drop on Jimmy. Jimmy just went in shootin', kept it up till there was no more Ike Pattee to shoot at. Now let's git back to the hotel. There's a blind man and his daughter almighty anxious awaitin'."

The ruckus was over and lamps were coming on in the saloons along both sides of the street. The citizens of Alkali were gathering the dead and unsaddling dead men's horses. A light showed in the Widder Smith's dressmaking and millinery shop and across the street at the hotel.

Jimmy Dixon rode along between Ted and Burt Grant, and when the three of them began calling each other fighting names and sort of scuffling on horseback, Old Man Dixon and Buck Bell, riding along behind, nodded and grinned because that was like old times. There had been an occasional black eye or bloody nose and skinned knuckles then to show for it. Mostly it had been the two younger boys Jimmy Dixon and Vern Grant matched against Ted and Burt Grant. And Mary

had pitched in to help Jimmy and Vern. "If Vern was here," Jimmy Dixon said without remembering Vern was dead, "we'd take you two big overgrown sheep-herders to a cleanin'."

THEN before the last words were out of his mouth, Jimmy remembered. He slumped and wilted in his saddle, the grin gone from his face. The scuffling ended, and for a short ways they rode in silence.

"Looky here, Jimmy," said Ted. "One thing we might as well straighten out here as fu'ther up the crick. Never for one doggoned minute did Burt and me believe you shot Vern. You'd picked a fight with Vern at the dance, and all of us had too much rotgut. When a couple-three-four Bar D cowhands horned in, it was a general free-for-all. But there were no guns. And no thought of a gun play. When it was over, and you got knocked out, we told them Bar D cowpunchers to take you off somewhere and sober you up and wipe you off."

"Then us three Grants headed back for the dance. Vern didn't go back inside to dance. You'd skinned him up purty bad and tore his shirt off and bloodied his nose, and he stayed outside where somebody was passin' the bottle."

"Me'n Burt was inside when we heard shootin' outside. When we got out there we couldn't find Vern, and there was some fellers bunched up a couple of hundred yards away. When we got there somebody said Vern was shot. You was staggerin' around glassy-eyed with a six-shooter in your hand and the Bar D cowhands said you'd shot Vern Grant in the back."

"I took your gun away and it was like takin' a stick of candy from a kid. We had to drag and pack you over to jail you was that far gone. When we turned you over to Tub and told him to lock you up, me'n Burt said then that you was too groggy and drunk to thumb back a gun hammer, and too glassy eyed to see anything to shoot at. Whoever had shot Vern in the back had dead-centered his shot."

"We knew it was some kind of a dirty frame-up. But we said nothin'. Our best bet was to string along—and we did. And we played 'em like Ike Pattee dealt 'em. And Ike didn't know we had the dead-wood on him till we rode up on each side

of him a while ago when we got to town, and took his gun and threwed him in jail. Hell, Jimmy, you've always bin like another brother to us, even when Ike Pattee ribbed his dirty sheep and cattle feudin'. You never hated us any more than we hated you."

"But Mary? What about—?"

Burt reached out and knocked off Jimmy's hat, grabbed it in mid-air and handed it to him.

"You dumb blind damnfool. Mary. Gosh sakes, you sawed-off, hammered-down, sorrel-maned, speckle-faced bone-head. Since we were kids together, Mary's



The Grants and Jimmy Dixon. . . .

loved you. And not like a sister. Then you quit comin' to the ranch—but you'd ride forty miles to town to see the Widder Smith's Ida."

"Ida," Jimmy's ears reddened. "Ida never meant a thing, but Vern was givin' her a rush, and I was tryin' to cut him out. With Ike Pattee ribbin' a sheep war, I couldn't be ridin' to the Grant ranch to see Mary. There's never bin any girl but Mary, and when she fetched her father to jail to see me and she looked at me like I was some kind of a mangy coyote—"

"A slimy snake," said Ted Grant.

"A hydrophobia skunk," said Burt.

"We'll give him a band of sheep for a weddin' present, Burt."

"And a nice brand new sheephook, Ted."

Jimmy Dixon blatted at them like a sheep. That had always been his way of starting a rough-and-tumble scuffle with the Grant boys. But before they could grab him, Jimmy spurred on ahead. He didn't pull up until he reached the lighted hotel.

MARY GRANT was standing there in the hotel doorway. Ida Smith stood beside her and the two girls had their arms

(Continued on page 130)

Bloody Harvest

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



No man alive can shake off his destiny. . . . And Johnny Lanham, who walked like a killer, talked like a killer, and shot like a killer—knew he'd have to die like one, too! . . .

BEN IVES rode into Sisco with a chore on his hands—one that chafed his easy-going nature. There was something he had let drift too long. Hugh Hatcher hadn't said anything. Hugh let any man of his crew solve his tangles as he saw fit, and he was a good boss for that reason. But old Hugh had been showing signs of impatience with his ramrod. There was a limit to how far a man walked with a friend, and Hugh plainly thought

Ben was walking too far with Johnny Lanham.

Johnny was a problem—always had been. No better working rider sat a saddle than Johnny—when he worked. But Johnny's first allegiance was no longer to the H & H, and Hatcher was like any boss on the grass. He expected a man to put in full time for his pay.

Ben stopped in front of Barrett's Livery at the head of Sisco's main street. Old Man Barrett, who had kept a respectful distance from the H & H foreman previously now came out with a familiar grin.

"Howdy, Ben. How's everything out on the flats?"

"Everything is all right," Ben told him coldly. "Give Cinnamon a bait of oats and have that swipe of yours rub him down. Seen Johnny Lanham?"

"Sure. Jawed quite a spell with him this morning. He's around."

Ben moved along the board walk, past the false fronts which tried to make something of this little town. So Johnny was around. Around trash like Old Man Barrett and Billy Misker, the town marshal, who came out of his little shanty to offer a grinning time of day to Ben as he passed. Attempting, like Barrett, to capitalize on his friendship for Johnny and establish closeness with the H & H foreman—a man who had always ignored him.

Misker was a luxury the town didn't need, but it was the town's business. Ben merely had no use for the man, and no need for his friendliness. Misker wanted something for his greetings and his grins. Johnny should realize that.

The tobacco-stained marshal was hunting a little slice of glory. Misker had backed down once when challenged by Fritz Taggart. Now, after a frenzied three seconds ten days ago at Dome's Corral, in which Johnny had cut Taggart down with a single shot, Misker had been at his heels.

And Misker was grinning at Ben Ives because he was Johnny's friend and boss. Ben didn't like it—not at all. He was going to straighten this all out with Johnny, once and finally.

He turned in at Leather's general store and passed a folded piece of paper from his pocket across the counter to the man behind it.

"Here's an order, Howie," he said. "The wagon'll pick it up later in the day."

Howard Leather nodded silently, a precise, bespectacled man who usually had time for a chat with Ben. Not only because he valued the H & H account, but because of a personal interest in Ben. However, he obviously didn't care to talk this afternoon. He turned away, his silence intimidating. There was a question Ben wanted to ask him, not about Johnny Lanham, although he knew Johnny was in Leather's mind.

Leather had reasons to be worried because of Johnny's activities since the affair at Dome's Corral, and Ben realized with sudden bitterness that Howie held him in large measure responsible. It wasn't right.

FAILING friendliness from Leather, Ben turned to the door, straightening with a sense of relief when he saw the girl angling across the street outside. It was better to talk to Mary Lou about what was in his mind than her father, anyway. He went out onto the verandah, removing his hat.

Mary Lou came on across the walk, a pretty, dark-haired girl, lifting a full freshly starched gingham dress so the skirt was above her shoe-tops, to clear the dust of the street. Ben smiled uneasily, angry at his own uncertainty, and the situation which caused it. This was something else Johnny Lanham had done when he came up out of Texas, trading on a boyhood friendship with Ben Ives for a job on the H & H.

"Afternoon, Mary Lou," Ben said. And his eyes searched the girl's face, wishing he could recapture the warming sureness he had known before with this girl. The H & H had a pretty little cabin on the creek for its foreman. Ben had never used it. But before Johnny had come in off of the *llanos* he had made plans. Mary Lou Leather had been a major part of them.

"Hello, Ben," the girl said. "What are you doing in town?" That was a question to which she should know the answer. He could not even tell if she was pleased to see him.

"Some business," he said. "Mostly to make sure about the dance Saturday night. Eight o'clock be about right to pick you

up? Can't make it much before that."

"I'm sorry, Ben," the girl said. "I'm not going to the dance."

Ben felt a little sick. He had anticipated this, he supposed. He had to boss the H & H. He didn't have the time an irresponsible rider did. He understood Howard Leather's friendlessness, now. This had gone farther than he had thought. Johnny was riding a high saddle, for a fact.

"You're going with Johnny?" he said.

The girl looked levelly at him.

"No," she answered. "I'm not going. Johnny asked me. But I'm not going—with either of you. I—Ben, I didn't want to have to decide. Let it go at that, now, please."

Ives stood for a moment woodenly on the steps. Mary Lou brushed on past him into her father's store, her hand touching his for a moment in passing—a gesture of apology, perhaps. Maybe a plea for forgiveness. So here was what had happened at Dome's Corral reaching deep into his own life—and he had only been standing by.

Here was Johnny Lanham reaching deeper than any friend had a right. The fight and Johnny's debonair carelessness of manner since and talk among fools in the town—glory-hunters like Barrett and Billy Misker, who liked others to make their shade for them. An eighteen-year-old girl might be impressed. She might even be flattered by the attention of a man who caused such talk.

Ben wanted to call the girl back. He wanted to tell her the truth, but knew he couldn't. She wouldn't believe him and she wouldn't understand. She would think jealousy of Johnny Lanham was making him run the boy down. It was this false glamour hanging so thickly about Johnny which made the whole business so unfair. Howard Leather knew what the truth was. If he couldn't make this daughter understand, Ben Ives wouldn't be able to do so.

Ben shook himself and went on down the steps, on across the street. He turned into the Buffalo Bar. He knew that the town would begin talking about him. The town would have seen him meet Mary Lou there before the store. The town would know she was not going to the dance because she couldn't yet choose between Ben Ives and Johnny Lanham. There would

be some talk. But to hell with the town.

Talk and the town had made this thing about Johnny what it was. Talk would make it worse, unless talk was silenced, unless Johnny was brought up on a short halter and poured back into britches the right size for him.

HOBAN, owner and keeper of the Buffalo, was a man with cynically tired eyes which looked as if they had seen everything that could happen in the grass country. A man with his own wisdom. A man without history. None knew where Hoban had come from. None knew what his past had been. He was not a man who made friends, but he had the respect of all. And he was warmer to Ben Ives than to most. He nodded at his backbar as Ben came in.

"The clock says this is a surprise, Ives," he said quietly. "You don't usually drink on your boss's time." He paused, looking closely into Ben's face. Bending, he brought a bottle from under the bar. "Maybe you need it, at that. Looking for Lanham?"

"He went down the street half an hour ago. Showed me a clipping from last week's El Paso paper—"

"He's wearing the damned thing out!" Ben said bitterly. "Talk here has been bad enough on him. That story, his name in print, swelled him two sizes overnight. I was out at Dome's, Hoban. I know what happened—"

He had been there. Dome's Corral. A former stage station on the far side of the H & H. He had drifted that way to pick up some raisins at the little store for the ranch cook. And he had found Johnny Lanham out in front of the place. Johnny didn't belong there. He'd sneaked in for a quick drink from the bottle always available under the store counter, maybe. It was a work day and Johnny was supposed to be on the north range.

Ben thought about talking to Johnny—this drifting away from his chores had been happening a little too often—and he didn't notice a dark, wolfish little man who seemed to be stoked up over something. Ives went into the store, finding Mack Harvey of the Territorial Land and Cattle Company at the counter. He had a word or two with Harvey and bought his rai-

sins. He reached the door with Harvey just in time to see the lid come off, outside.

The wolf-faced stranger was now hiding Peewee Lantz, and Johnny spoke up, ordering him to stop. Ives agreed with that. He'd have spoken if Johnny hadn't. Peewee was trying gamely to run a one-man spread out a ways, and having a hard time of it because of a gimpy leg. The man with the wolfish face turned on Johnny with a snarl.

"You want cards in this game, saddle tramp?"

The man wore two guns, tied low. Johnny had one. To Ben's surprise, Johnny poised a hand over it and his body went strangely tense.

"You keep a tongue in your head!" Johnny snapped back. "No man calls me a tramp. Apologize or back it up!"

It came with a lightning swiftness before Ives could move or speak. Two hands slapping simultaneously for their guns. Two weapons roared together. Dust spouted at Johnny's feet. The dark little man clutched at his shirt with his free hand before spilling silently onto his face to lie on dust that darkened with his blood.

And Mack Harvey whispering, shakenly and in amazement: "My God, Ben, that was Fritz Taggart!"

Ben Ives had been there.

"Taggart was one of the best, wasn't he, Hoban?" he asked the man behind the Buffalo bar. The man pursed his lips in thought.

"Guess you could say that," he conceded. "One of a type. Not many of them, for which we can be grateful. Never will be. The life's too dangerous, too chancy. Like a sheepdog that's tasted blood and

runs wild till it's cut down—that's your true gunslick, Ives. The hot taste of blood on his tongue. Lives by his guns because nothing else can satisfy him. I couldn't name half a dozen in the whole West that were really that kind. Taggart was one. Fritz had two faults. A gunpowder temper and too much liking for whiskey. He was rushing at death with the brakes off."

"IT WAS an accident, Hoban," Ives said steadily. "I've known Johnny since we were kids together in East Texas, except for the four years I worked for the H & H before he came out here. He's no gunslick. Talk, that newspaper story, wide eyes and pats on the back—they're going to ruin him. I've got to make Johnny see he stopped Taggart and survived through the kind of luck a man prays for and only gets once in his lifetime."

"You be damned sure you're right before you try making Lanham see anything," Hoban said. "Be sure you're not looking at the muzzle instead of the breech."

"Meaning what?" Ben asked sharply.

"I'm not quite sure," the bar man said slowly. "You're worrying that Lanham will believe all this talk about his gun-speed and tangle some man who's really good with his iron. Then you're fresh out of a friend you've known a long time."

Ives nodded. That was it, exactly. He didn't want Johnny dead. He especially didn't want it if Mary Lou Leather was really growing interested in Johnny. Maybe there wasn't all to the life of a foreman's wife that Mary Lou wanted. Maybe Johnny could build what she was looking for. But not with a gun in his hand or six

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feet under the sod. Johnny was his best friend. Mary Lou was something more than that. He wanted her to have the best.

"Well," Hoban went on as he remained silent, "I've kept my nose out of other people's business since I came here. When I told you maybe you were worrying about the wrong thing, I was sticking it into your business. But I'll go a little farther, since I've started. You're worth three Johnny Lanhams. You remember that. Don't send a good thing after a bad—"

He broke off. Johnny Lanham had come into the Buffalo.

He was a year younger than Ben Ives and looked five years younger. A slender, smooth-faced, handsome youngster with pale blue eyes and a disarming grin.

"Oh, oh—the boss!" he laughed. "*Por Dios*, Ben, don't look down your nose at me. Sure, I took the day off for a *pasear* into town. Things to do and people to see."

It was Johnny's way—anticipate a reprimand and pull its teeth with a laugh. He came up to Ives at the bar with a squeak and sheen of new leather—shell belt and holsters, twin guns, tied down, the brass caps of looped shells gleaming. Unbidden, he picked up the bottle Hoban had set out for Ben and poured himself a drink. It was not his first for the day. He wasn't drunk, just warm, Pleasantly warm and relaxed. Every movement fluid and easy.

"Hatcher let me take you into a full crew as a personal favor, Johnny," Ben said quietly. "I'm not laughing at the way you've dodged your chores. Hatcher isn't, either. He knows you've been pushing the boys around at the bunkhouse, too. Probably he suspects why those two who quit last week decided to drift—that they'd had enough of you. And no man likes a boy on his crew wearing twin sixes. You've got to pull in your horns, Johnny."

Lanham took the rye whiskey neat, blinked, and looked at his reflection in the backbar mirror. Sullenness came up in him.

"What's in it for me if I work like hell and act a nice boy?" he growled. "Forty and found. The hell with that!"

"Fool's talk," Ben said shortly. "There's opportunity in this country for a man with his eyes open. But it's not picked up with a pair of guns."

"No?" Johnny asked. There was some-

thing in his eyes Ben had never seen there before. "Did you see the outfit Taggart was wearing out there the other day? My wages for a year wouldn't have bought his jacket. There's pay for a man that'll wear his iron like he meant it, Ben. And I mean mine!"

"TAGGART'S dead Johnny. Come to your sense, man. You drew straws with death when you tangled Fritz Taggart had left off. And in Ben Ives' mind your way. It can't happen again. I don't want to see you killed. And there are others like Fritz."

"Who?" Johnny asked bluntly. "One, in this part of the country, maybe. Dobbs Hornaday. You're all right, Ben. Should have been a preacher. You mean what you say, I suppose. But keep it for somebody that'll listen. I've got something important to talk to you about. Mary Lou—"

"Not in here, Johnny," Ben protested sharply.

"Why not?" Johnny countered. "Hoban keeps the place clean. Look, Ben, I'm climbing the big ladder. I've made up my mind. I'm up a dozen steps on most men, now. Taggart did that for me. I'm going on. I want to take Mary Lou with me."

It was quiet, matter-of-fact. An incredible thing—that a man should so want to climb—but Lanham gave it credibility with his sureness. Ben Ives stared at him, unaware of the sweat on his own brow and upper lip. The thought pounded in him that he had let this go too far—too damned far.

There had been too much made of the Dome's Corral affair. Johnny had come to believe the marveling talk he heard. He believed he could take up where Fritz Taggart had left off. And in Ben Ives' mind was the knowledge he should have beat this out of Johnny's brains the first day that it had showed up.

There was an unreal note to this—Lanham so confident, so damned handsome and sure. Hoban, woodenly polishing glasses. The clock ticking. He noted the passage of three horsemen up the street. Hoban's head swiveled to follow them. Familiar things, part of the solid pattern of the life in which Ben Ives believed. And Johnny throwing it all out of focus with his sureness and his intent.

"Mary Lou has agreed to this, Johnny?" he asked softly.

"No," Lanham admitted easily. "Hadden't decided it myself until I saw just how quick I got full of your lecturing, Ben. But don't worry. She'll go."

"You're not going to ask her," Ben said with a rising pressure behind his voice. "She deserves more than trailing a gun-crazy fool. The way you're cocked and triggered right now, she'd be a widow almost before she was a wife. You stay here and turn in a good day for Hatcher between sunup and sundown and quit acting like a kid and you'll have as fair a try for her as anybody. I guarantee you that, Johnny. But figure on pulling out of here with your belt full of brass and you'll go alone—without even seeing her. You'll go now, Johnny."

Ben stepped away from the bar. He was contemptuous of the new leather and the tied-down guns at the other's waist. Johnny was a scrawny kid out of East Texas and Ben Ives had always been able to hammer the devil out of him with his hands. This was going to be hand work. The hell with guns. Johnny grinned at him, but it was a tight and unpleasant grin.

"You're the only folks I've ever had, Ben," he said. "The only one that's given a damn about me since I was a shirt-tail kid, out in the brush. I'd do a lot for you and I'd take a lot—but not crowding. After Fritz Taggart, I don't take that from any man!"

Ben bunched his fists. Let others give Johnny right of way and deference because of the iron on his thigh. Let them whisper in awe behind his back. Johnny would look just like anybody else with a bloody nose and a swollen eye. He started forward. Hoban arrested him with a sharp word.

"Ben! Ben, listen to me a minute."

IVES glanced at the saloonman in startled surprise. So did Lanham. Hoban had both hands on his bar. He was agitated, more earnest and animated than Ben could ever remember him.

"Hoban, you said you kept your nose at home," Ben reminded him.

"I know," Hoban admitted swiftly. "But I got to tell both of you something.

Before you tangle, you better listen!"

Ben relaxed slowly, watching Lanham. The younger man eased, turned and poured himself a drink.

"This seems to be my day for lectures. Let her fly, short and sweet, Hoban. What's your subject?"

"Taggart," the bar man said.

"Taggart?" Johnny looked puzzled. "He's closed out—six feet under."

"Sure. Dead," Hoban snapped. "But not forgotten. Takes a lot of riding to reach Sisco from anyplace. Takes time for news to circulate out from here. Takes time for that news to bring men in for a look at the gunswift who cut Taggart down. Men who'd like to own the name you've got now, Lanham. Men willing to brace you in a try to take it over. Maybe men who've sided Taggart here and there and who don't like the idea of him having died before an unknown's gun. Hornaday, for instance."

"You're wasting your time, Hoban," Ben said.

"Shut up!" Johnny snapped. He was interested in what the saloonman was saying. "What about Dobbs Hornaday? I know of him. About the best."

"He's a cold-blooded weasel," Hoban growled. "A murderous banty with a fast one-way ticket to hell in each hand. Not like Taggart. No temper and no nerves. He never takes a long chance. He sided Taggart for a while, some time back."

"Partners, eh?"

"There's a code about such things, Lanham," Hoban said grimly. "Hornaday is obligated to look you up. There's something to think about. And you'd better start cracking your head, instead of squabbling here with Ives when he's giving you the best steer a man could. You haven't got all day."

Lanham was slow in getting it. When he did, he continued to toy thoughtfully with his drink. Finally he pushed it away and Ben Ives turned cold to watch him.

"Hornaday's here?" Lanham asked.

"Rode in a couple of minutes ago with a pair of friends. Saw them pass the window. No coincidence about it, Lanham. Nothing in Dobbs' regular line of work would bring him here—not with a pair of friends to back him up. He's here to see how Taggart died. He's here to plant you.

Maybe you've got all of ten minutes."

Lanham grinned. He pulled one of his new guns and held it critically up to the light.

"Not that long, Hoban," he corrected. "Hornaday's too important a gent to be kept waiting."

"He'll wait and you'll ride!" Ben Ives snapped at him. "Hoban, go out and pick a horse up off the street. Anybody's horse. Get it around to your back door. Johnny, you slide out that way and hit for the ranch. Get under cover and stay there until you hear from me. I've heard of Hornaday, too. He didn't build his reputation by being hasty or foolish. He'll listen to me."

Johnny tried to make a protest. Ben brushed by him and shouldered through the street door of the Buffalo. It was warm outside, and quiet. The town had taken to cover, sensing thunder in the air.

Down in front of Leather's store three men had dismounted. One was turning away in the direction of Barrett's Livery. Ben angled out into the street, also, moving toward them.

BEN stopped a dozen paces short of them. He singled out the small man in the middle.

"Hornaday?"

"Yes." The answer came from lips which moved only slightly.

"I'm Ives, foreman at the H & H ranch. You're looking for Johnny Lanham?"

"For the man who stopped Fritz Taggart."

"It was an even fight, Hornaday," Ben said steadily. "I was there. Lanham is just a kid puncher—not in Taggart's class. He's no gunhand. Nothing to you in matching draws with him. Want to take my word for that and ride on?"

Hornaday frowned. "So Fritz got an even break? I'd wondered. If he hadn't—well, I'd see the man he faced, give him the same break, and send him along to join Fritz. Maybe what you say changes that. I told Fritz plenty of times he'd spread himself in a strange town once too often. How about a drink while we talk about it with the sun out of our eyes?"

"Sure." Ben said with relief. Time enough had passed for Hoban to have found Johnny a horse and sent him on his

way across back lots toward the ranch. He started to turn—and he froze.

Johnny Lanham was coming up the street behind him, angling out from the walk, coming up with a brusque gesture which was plain enough. Get to hell out of the way! He meant Ben Ives. His pale eyes were fixed unwinkingly on Dobbs Hornaday.

"I'm Lanham," he said in a voice Ben didn't recognize. "I took Taggart—center shot to the belly. You got an opinion about that, mister?"

It was too late then for Ben to protest—to say anything. He had taken a step to one side. He would not go back. He had stuck with Johnny always before this. He had to stick here, too. The man on Hornaday's left was watching him. Ben thought of his own gun—a handy tool with snakes and downed stock. Something a man learned to handle as well as any of the other tools of his trade. But not a weapon. Not against such men as these.

Hornaday shot a glance at Ben Ives which called him a liar, and his attention shifted back to Johnny Lanham and clung there.

"I might, Lanham," he said very softly. "Supposing you find out. Your draw!"

"And have it said I tagged you with the advantage of the first move on my side?" Johnny asked mockingly. "Your move, Hornaday, and see your boys don't get reckless ahead of you!"

Johnny had crouched a little, hands close to his guns, but not hooked. His face was set. He was a man Ben Ives did not know—a man Ben had never known. Something of the truth came to Ben, even as he realized he probably wouldn't live to know the rest of it. He forced his attention to the man on Hornaday's left. This one would be his.

The break came from the man on the far side of Hornaday. Hornaday followed. Then Ben. And Johnny Lanham's hands seemed to move leisurely through it all. But it was Johnny who loosed the first shot. Hornaday buckled, hitting the ground on one knee and firing a shot each from this position at Johnny and Ben. Both misses. The man was dead where he knelt, but Johnny slammed another shot into him and spilled him over. Flame lanced through dust and smoke.

Ben Ives hit the man he knew he would have to nail and the fellow went down. Then a hammer blow smashed into Ben, himself, and the taste of dust was in his mouth. He had a momentary glimpse of Johnny Lanham, upright and spraddle-legged in the street, grinning, one gun level and spitting fire, the other uptilted.

THE thunder died. The town edged out onto its walk. Four men lay in the dust of the street and Johnny Lanham stood over them, punching spent shells from one of his guns and then the other. Ben Ives stirred in the dust and raised himself with his good arm. Shock was wearing off and the numbness of it was subsiding. He had a hole in him, but it wasn't bad.

He had been lucky—and he had been wrong, from the beginning. Fritz Taggart had never had a chance. Dobbs Hornaday had never had a chance. Not against Johnny Lanham. The four years that he had been out of touch with Johnny had cloaked much. He understood what Hoban had been trying to tell him. There wasn't any use in pointing out the signs to Johnny. He was a long way down the road. He was one of the rare ones—one of the true killers.

Ben wondered if Johnny would look at him, if he would come over, now. Ben had done what he could. He had stood by

him—for a last time. But Johnny was not looking in Ben's direction. He was watching Mary Lou Leather run up the street. She passed Johnny, running raggedly on to kneel down in the dust beside Ben Ives, pulling his dusty and bloody shoulder against the freshness of her dress.

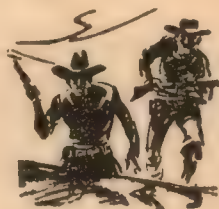
Johnny took a step toward them. The girl looked up, something which went beyond horror or hatred in her eyes. Lanham stopped for a moment, teetering in indecision, and dropped his hand in an ironic gesture. He turned wordlessly and walked up the street, an arrogance without hurry in every line of his body.

"Ben—Ben!" Mary Lou whispered. "Ben, I didn't understand!"

"Blood on his muzzle, Ben!" Hoban said. "He'll never turn back, now!"

"No," Ben said, tightening the grip of his good arm about Mary Lou's shoulders. "No. We'll never see him again. But we'll hear about him. People in a lot of places will hear about Johnny, maybe long after we're dead and forgotten."

Mary Lou made a small sound and pressed against him. Ben smiled with a deep weariness. Out of each evil, he suddenly remembered, some good must come. He thought the little foreman's cottage on the H & H creek would be a good place for a man to mend in—if he could get an agreeable nurse, on a permanent basis.



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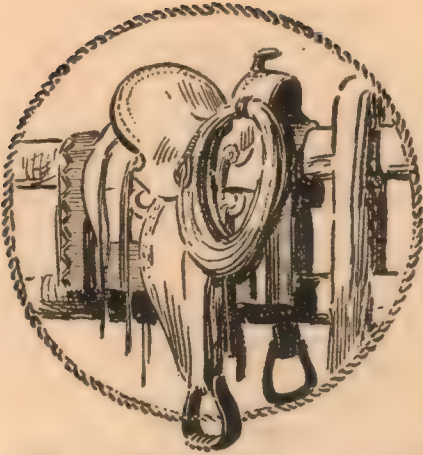
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The lethal lightning in the hoofs of a killer race-horse could win a fabulous pot of gold for its owner, Brick Flaherty knew. But it could also carry its half-pint rider straight to a quick, powder-blasted finish, smack in the middle of a red-hot feud-ripped hell-on-the-range!

Chapter I

RED FOR DANGER!

THEY SAY every pilgrim who goes West is running away from something—a wife, a boss, a misdeed, or maybe just the crowding of the States. Brick Flaherty was no exception.

Brick had drifted a good way since that day Spud Moore laid a hand on the bridle of his horse, and paid for it with his life. Brick's conscience was clear, Spud had asked for it, but Brick's jockey days were over.

Brick Flaherty—nobody bothered with his christened name, Matthew—



Track Dry, Triggers

*Smashing Saga
of a Strange
Frontier Feud*



The long whip snaked out and Brick could feel the horse beneath him quiver with terror. . . .

Fast . . .

**By
WILLIAM
SCHUYLER**

was small, red-headed and obviously Irish. His smallness had earned him a good living until he flipped the bridle-grabbing Spud out of his saddle.

His Irishness gave him a cocky shrewdness, a sense of humor, and a hell of a way with the ladies. His red head marked him true for a fast temper and fists to match.

As Brick let the roan have her own way for the last leg of the trip to Red Hill he had the feeling that this country of clay and grass and cow critters was going to be *home*. And home was what Brick needed. He had looked for home all through the States, stopping here a day, there a day, never satisfied.

Then there was the Mississippi. Brick stopped there a while at St. Louis. He liked the broad river. There, he thought, he could forget about high-strung horseflesh and crooked jockeys, and the men who owned them both. A new life on the water; that was the thing for him!

It didn't work. He moved on, always West. He didn't know that he was doing what lots of Brick Flahertys had done before. He worked his way; he learned about cows and grass and a new kind of horse. Cows you don't milk, grass that grows in stout, brown tufts, horses built of tough wire and bone, with a heart inside.

Somewhere along the way he heard about Red Hill and the Red Hill country. Some man kidded him about his red hair. They had a fight. Brick was a terrific fighter but the man whipped him fair. The man picked him up and propped him against the bar and they had a raft of drinks together.

The man said: "You and I are going to be friends, see. Any man who spots me maybe forty pounds and damn near licks me is going to be my friend. Ain't been a man fit me a good fight since I left Red Hill. They's real men there!" He said a lot more too but Brick remembered the part about *real men*. Brick was tired of crooks, chiselers, thin horns and cowards in general. Brick guessed he wanted to be a man among real men as much as anything in the world.

The Western stock saddle gave Brick more trouble than anything else in the West. He liked the tough horses and the

men who rode them, he even got a grudging respect for the value of a cow, but that heavy saddle with the high horn and steep cantle and those condemned long stirrups with the doghouses at the end—no! He made himself learn a cowman's seat, but every now and then he'd shorten the stirrups some and get his bruised pants off the slamming leather.

Two of the reallest men of the Red Hill country were looping reins over the rail of Joe Jackson's Hillside Saloon—Dutch Wurtel and his foreman, Bud Visser. Dutch, the older of the two, owned the 33. He was square-headed and square-bearded and was not averse to a square deal as long as he got the best of it, which he usually did, even against Ed Lannigan of the Box A.

Standing next to Dutch, taller and not so square, was Bud Visser. Bud took Dutch's orders and did a hard-fisted, efficient job of forwarding 33's interests. Dutch and Bud were in a good humor. They had just managed to cause Ed Lannigan and two of his men the inconvenience of a three-day dust-eating drive with three hundred of Ed's prime steers to a buyer at the railhead. Lannigan found the buyer all right but he was a hide and tallow buyer interested only in cheap culls at give-away prices.

Not till then did Lannigan's foreman, Max Springer, admit that he had received the tip from a puncher who said he'd quit the 33 and wanted to get even with Wurtel. Lannigan admitted he was the goat, swallowed his pride, and sent Max and the steers back to Box A.

DUTCH WURTEL and Visser were going into the Hillside to have a drink to their cleverness when the roan capered prettily down the street with Brick Flaherty aboard.

"Gawd!" exclaimed Bud Visser. "Get a load of the bridlepath dude." His voice was loud enough to carry cleanly to the sight-seeing Brick.

Brick's solid chin came around, strong hands drew the roan to a walk, blue eyes squinted at Visser and Wurtel. Visser's cleanshaven face was bland and insulting. Wurtel's square beard bristled in a superior smile. Boss and foreman looked at the newcomer lazily as if unaware of

his anger, then they looked at each other and shrugged.

Visser closed the remarks by saying: "Ought to be a law agin' them spring saddles—hard on a horse."

They showed no concern when the roan come to a complete stop and its rider left the saddle. They did not look up from the tie rail until they were ready to go into the Hillside. They had dismissed the fancy little rider completely from their minds when they saw him standing four-square on the bottom step to the board sidewalk.

The two big men stopped and took on the appearance of grown-ups being patient but mildly annoyed with a small boy. Dutch Wurtel split a match with his thumb and fiddled with imaginary shreds of meat in his teeth. His foreman rolled a smoke and looked levelly at a spot behind Brick, insolently demonstrating that he could look over Brick's head without raising his eyes.

After a bit, when the blue-eyed stranger with the red hair showing under a dusty black stetson didn't move, Visser spoke to his boss, keeping his eyes over the top of the black stetson. "Do you s'pose the little man would stand aside if'n we told him how cute he was pretty-footin' on that there roan?"

Brick's solid one hundred and forty-five pounds didn't move. He looked at Visser's six-two, one-ninety frame and quietly flung out his ultimatum: "The man who calls me a bridlepath dude has to prove he can ride better'n me. And the man who calls me little man is gonna get cut down to size."

Visser should have been warned by the mop of red hair, or the eyes, or the tone of experience in Brick's voice. He wasn't, and he did what Brick anticipated, the same thing all big men did the first time they came up against Brick. He advanced recklessly and with a contemptuous sweep of one long arm he said, "Come on Dutch. One side shorty!"

His second step never hit the ground, his arm never contacted Flaherty. Brick's sharp left in the stomach brought his head down. Then, bop, he made a neat arc and crashed to the ground. It was too easy and Brick suddenly knew the reason. He was used to fighting at his jockey

weight of a hundred and twenty-five. His new twenty pounds brought stuff behind his punch.

"You want some of it, mister?" Brick eyed Dutch Wurtel.

Dutch loved a good fight but just now he was looking astounded at his prone and helpless foreman. His mouth fell open and left a red hole in his beard.

NONE of the three men had noticed Edward Lannigan ride up and dismount. The marks of his futile drive to the railhead at Rincon and return showed on his gaunt, bony frame and his sun-and-laugh-wrinkled face. For a moment he stood aside, patting off a few pounds of dust and savoring the sight before him.

Lannigan smiled at the brick-top with the clenched fists. "Want a job, shorty? I'm thinking of firing my foreman."

Brick whirled and glared at Lannigan's cheerful face. "You're not so damn big I can't whip you too!"

Lannigan kept his smile. "Take it easy, Red. What do they call you? We'll start over again."

Brick cooled down. Here was a man you could learn to get along with. "Call me Brick or Flaherty," he announced without rancor or pride.

"Flaherty!" Lannigan's smile widened and the cake of dust on his face broke off in little pieces. "You wouldn't be Irish now would you, me lad?"

Brick forgot Wurtel and Visser completely. "Irish sure, but without the brogue." He looked at Lannigan's long upper lip and the sun-faded blue of his eyes. "Do I detect a hunk of Erin on your map?"

"Name of Lannigan, Ed Lannigan," the Box A rancher said and put out his hand. They shook and Lannigan repeated: "Want a job?"

"Yep, but no foreman's bunk. Not yet. I got some things to learn."

Lannigan glanced at Visser who was just trying to stand, holding a sore jaw in one hand. "You've already learned a lot about being my foreman, Brick. I reckon I can teach you the rest."

Visser mumbled some curses, and said: "Caught me off balance, Dutch. I'll fix the little runt later."

"Why not now?" Brick's color was up

again and he started for Visser. Lannigan held him back. Wurtel stood by—he was not a man to take up another's fight.

"Take it easy," Lannigan said. "I don't think Bud's jaw can hold together for another round." He looked at Wurtel. "I guess my new man kind of leveled off for that dusty ride I just had."

The eyes above the beard looked innocent. "What ride?"

"You and I been playin' tricks on each other for too long, Dutch, for me not to spot this one. Besides, Max Springer told me who gave him the tip about the cattle buyer at Rincon. He said that weasel, name of Gantner, told him he'd been fired from your 33 and wanted to get even with you. He said Box A could beat you to the draw with this buyer if we started to drive Wednesday."

Dutch Wurtel couldn't hide his mirth even behind his bristles. He chuckled, "I reckon those three hundred prime head ain't so prime now."

"Nope. They'll look kind o' scrawny when the boys get 'em back to grass. But it was worth the ride to come back and see the Killarney Kid here flatten Visser with two licks, and him being anyway forty pounds lighter. I'll feed him up and he'll whop the whole parcel of you without me raisin' a finger."

That kind of talk appealed to Brick. "Let's get started now!" He went for Visser again. Visser looked willing, but both ranchers held back their boys.

Wurtel winked at Visser. "I'm savin' you, Bud, to ride Big Boy." He cleared his throat pointedly. "That is, if I can find a man willing to run a nag against him."

That was an open challenge to Ed Lannigan and an invitation to keep the rivalry hot between the 33 and the Box A.

BETWEEN the two of them, Wurtel and Lannigan held or used all the good range in the Red Hill country. A few small outfits were allowed to graze their herds in the big valley but ninety out of a hundred cows at roundup held either the neat 33 brand or the lopsided square with the big A inside.

For fifteen years or more, since Dutch and Ed had taken over their families' herds and range, those two men had by

fair means or foul tried to bankrupt each other. They never tired of a series of practical jokes, dirty dealings, and fights.

The peak of their rivalry came just after the fall roundup. That was the time for drinking bouts and street fights between the crews, chicken pullings, and what had come to be known as the Red Hill Sweepstakes.

The race had started harmlessly enough ten years ago when Lannigan and Wurtel were younger and proud of their own special mounts and their ability to ride them. They made some interesting side bets and set the two and a quarter miles from the Corners into town as the race course.

The bets got bigger and one year Wurtel begged off because of a feigned back ache. He asked Lannigan if it was all right if one of his men rode in his place. Lannigan said sure as long as the bet held. Wurtel looked reluctant and let Lannigan think he was afraid to put up the money. That threw Lannigan off guard.

The rider in Wurtel's place turned out to be a new man. Bud Visser had just joined the 33 and his special qualification for his job was that he owned a beautiful quarter horse he called Big Boy. He could ride that horse like the wind. Lannigan had a strong pony in the race but Big Boy left him in a trail of dust and came into town without panting.

Lannigan took it and paid up with a smile but the next year he imported a horse of his own. This filly gave Big Boy a terrific race but Lannigan couldn't get the best out of her so he lost again. And for two years after that. It was beginning to cost him big money.

Then he sold the filly and bought a big chestnut who showed strong thoroughbred characteristics. Chesty was strong and fast but nervous as a cat. Lannigan's foreman, Max Springer, said he could handle him so he was elected to ride the race last year. With a harsh bit and a loaded quirt he managed Chesty and would have beaten Big Boy except that the wily Visser spotted Chesty's weakness.

When the racing horses were rounding the bend in the road where it hugs the butte about a mile out of Red Hill, Visser pulled a short stock whip out from his bulging shirt front. The crack of it over

Chesty's rump spooked the big chestnut so badly that he cut across country and didn't stop running until Max was jounced into a mat of prickly pears. Lannigan had to threaten Max with a gun to keep him from beating the horse to death when they finally caught it.

The Box A owner was not willing to risk his horse or any more of his money against Big Boy and his clever rider. Wurtel knew this and took great pleasure in needling him about it.

Wurtel laughed harshly. "What's wrong with Chesty, Ed? Did he run his heart out chasing prairie dogs last year?" Wurtel and Visser went into the Hillside Saloon.

Ed Lannigan loved his big horse and wanted to defend him but he knew he would be euchered into a bet he couldn't afford. That last trick of Wurtel's took a lot of valuable meat off his best steers and the Box A was teetering on the brink of financial ruin. He held himself back from answering their taunts.

When they were alone in the street, Brick spoke. "How come you didn't take them up, Mr. Lannigan?"

"You wouldn't understand. You're new here."

"I understand Wurtel's got a horse he thinks is better than yours. Is it?" His Irish was coming up again and the mention of fast horses made his gambler's blood race.

Lannigan's answer was calm. "My Chesty is faster than any four-legged critter in the territory."

"Better than this Big Boy they're talking about?"

"Twice the horse."

BRICK shook his head. He began to think he was hiring out to a man without guts. "You got the best horse and you're scared to run him."

"Yes. He'd be beaten."

"Look Mr. Lannigan, you offered me a job. I like you fine. But I'm the kind of a guy that fights for what he thinks is right."

"Yeah, I saw that," Lannigan observed and smiled at the recollection of Bud Visser's abrupt dive to the dirt.

"I'm that kind of guy, see, and I want to work for that kind of guy, not a guy that'll back down from a measly race."

Lannigan was surprised at the fierce feeling that showed in this miniature Irishman. "Take it easy boy, and I'll explain it to you. It's a matter of a bet."

"All the more reason. By God, a man who won't back his horse up with his chips ain't fit to own him!"

Lannigan didn't want to explain the size of his bets with Wurtel. They were a private matter—and they were big. Instead he said, "Last year he beat me by stampeding Chesty with a stock whip."

"Dirty work, eh? You let him get by with it?"

"Nobody saw it but my rider, Max Springer, and it was his word against Visser's." He shrugged to show the hopelessness of arguing the point.

Brick imagined any man on a race track hauling out a stock whip and getting by with it. "What the hell! Do you run the race in a canyon? What's the route?"

"The route? Speak my language, Brick."

"The route, the distance, how far do they go?"



KENT

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"Oh. They run from the Corners—that's a place where the wagon road forks off right and left to Wurtel's spread and mine—from there to here."

"How far's that? Six, eight, ten furlongs?" Brick was professionally interested now, though he had sworn to himself months ago that he'd never have anything to do with another horse race. He'd had to kill a man once.

"I can give it to you in miles—about two and a quarter it is. Furlongs don't mean a thing to me." Lannigan was puzzled.

"Two and a quarter!" Brick burst out. "Cripes man, race horses aren't built for that. What do you use, hunters?"

"There you go again," Lannigan said. "What's a hunter?"

"A fence-buster, a fox-chaser."

"You don't meant what those fancy pants with the pink coats ride out in the States?"

Brick nodded.

"No," Lannigan allowed. "Chesty's just an extra good horse with plenty heart and maybe some high-falutin' blood in him somewheres."

"Can't Chesty run the course?"

"You mean, can't he run from the Corners to town?" Lannigan laughed. "He can run it ten times a day and be looking for trouble after."

"What are you two arguing about?" Neither man had seen the girl walk down the street from the mercantile store.

"Oh!" she said when she saw Brick with his hat off. "I thought you were one of Dad's boys. I didn't mean to interrupt, Dad." She turned to go.

Brick's blue eyes were wide with admiration. This girl was a delicate counterpart of Edward Lannigan. The same frank, smiling eyes with the crinkly corners, the same fine dark hair. The same straight, easy carriage, and look of open friendliness and fearlessness.

"**W**AIT a minute Flo," Lannigan called to her. "Meet Brick Flaherty first. Brick, this is my daughter and the thorn in my side, Flo Lannigan."

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Flaherty. I heard you mention Chesty. Are you going to buy him?" She looked directly at him and Brick could swear she looked

concerned when she asked him the question.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Lannigan. No, I couldn't buy a horse I haven't seen. Do you want to get rid of Chesty?"

"Oh no!"

"Yes, she does, Brick," Lannigan put in. He wrapped a long arm around his daughter's waist. "Flo's jealous. Chesty's the only thing at the Box A that's nearly as pretty as she is."

The girl frankly blushed and beamed up at her father. "I don't know that I'm flattered being compared to a horse, but Chesty is beautiful. I wish we could find somebody to ride him besides Max. Max is afraid of him and that makes him mean."

Brick's decision was made. He only waited long enough to swallow the heart out of his throat so he could speak. "Mr. Lannigan," he asked, "is Wurtel still in there?" He pointed at the Hillside.

"I supposed so."

"Tell him we'll take his bet."

"*We!*" Lannigan released his arm from the girl. "We'll what?"

"You make the bet. I'll ride." Brick said it with the confidence of a lawyer quoting a statute.

"Flo, you run along honey," Lannigan waved his daughter off. "I've got some things to tell this mick!" Flo smiled weakly at the two men and was glad to retreat from what she sensed as one of her father's rare explosions.

Before she was barely out of earshot across the street, Lannigan's long lip began to quiver and he got red in the face. He shoved his face to within a foot of the calm visage of the bantam Flaherty.

"You coyote's cast-off whelp! 'You make the bet. I'll ride,' you say! Listen to me, you shorthorn pilgrim. We don't bet marbles and teacups on these races. How do I know you can even ride?" Each sentence was like a blast from a shotgun.

Brick didn't budge or flicker a hair. "I can ride well enough to risk your flea-bitten thousand bucks, and two of my own!" He patted his stomach where his money belt made a bulge.

Lannigan fumed and swore and fumed some more. What could a man say in the face of such effrontery? He surveyed

Brick from head to toe and looked at the tight-gloved hands that rested at his belt. Even with gloves on they were the strong, sensitive hands of a rider.

Brick took the survey stolidly and returned look for look. Lannigan's breath slowed again and the color of calm returned to his face. "You meant that, didn't you?" He was only half asking, he knew the answer. Brick nodded. "All right, Mister Flaherty, you've got a job riding Chesty six weeks from today. You still want to put up your two thousand with my flea-bitten one?"

Without hesitation, Brick opened his shirt, untied the thongs and pulled out the money belt. "Here, and buy yourself a drink. Your daughter will show me to the Box A." Both men broke out in wide Irish grins. They were born gamblers both, and both knew that Lannigan's bet would be no flea-bitten thousand!

Chapter II

TOO MANY RAMRODS!

THE heat of the afternoon was still strong and the frayed edges of men's tempers were breaking off at the Box A when Flo Lannigan and Brick Flaherty came up. They let themselves through the Texas gate from the headquarters pasture to the area behind the scattered barns, corrals, sheds.

Out of the big barn stepped a red-faced man whose pale eyes peered intensely out from the shadows of their cave-like brows. He was not a big man but the barrel of his body was stout and measured about the same waist and chest. The funny pipstern legs such men often have carried him gingerly along. He had the reins of a rangy black horse which trailed him cheerlessly. He had a foot in the near stirrup before he saw the girl and the man who was looping the gate back to the fence post.

He called. "Don't bother riggin' the gate, Miss Flo, I'll be goin' through directly." He forked the black and jogged up to them.

Brick eyed him coolly. There was something about this florid man that did not invite friendliness. The man returned Brick's courtesy by shooting him one

stingy glance, and then turning away.

Flo Lannigan didn't bother to introduce the men. She seemed preoccupied with the gear draped at the horn of the man's saddle.

"Where are you going with rope and bridle this time of day, Max?" she asked. Her tone was direct and loaded with suspicion. Brick caught a change of expression on the man's face, as if a curtain were drawn over it to hide what was really there. Max she called him—that would be Max Springer, the foreman.

"Goin' about my business ma'am," Springer said. Then he changed the subject, deliberately and insolently, Brick thought. "When's Ed comin' back? I guess he's pretty sore about takin' them steers to Rincon and back."

"Mad enough," the girl admitted. "Especially at having a foreman dumb enough to bite on one of Wurtel's cheap tricks." There was no love lost between these two, Brick could see. He thought Springer would be capable of striking the girl if no one was there to see him.

The curtain raised from Springer's face and revealed his real emotion—hate. Could anyone hate the Lannigans? This man could. Naked hate showed in his light green eyes and the tenseness of every muscle. Something was really wrong here. It came out with the girl's next question.

"You're going after Chesty, aren't you?"

Max Springer's face grew redder. He held his tongue. At the mention of the horse Brick took new interest in the exchange.

"You thought Dad and I would stay in town tonight and you'd have a chance to get even with Chesty." Flo's words were coming faster. "That's a whip there too, isn't it Max?" The foreman involuntarily gave himself away by flicking an eye down to the gunny sack hanging from his saddle. He turned redder.

His next words were controlled. "I'll be goin' along about my business ma'am, if you'll step aside." Neither the girl nor the foreman seemed to know or care that Brick was there.

Flo Lannigan drew her mount across the opening in the fence. "You won't whip Chesty. He never did anything to you."

"Never did anything. Ha! Just pitched me in a pack o' spines, that's all."

"That was a year ago."

Max Springer was a prideful vindictive man. "I don't forget easy." He ground the words through his teeth.

"It wasn't Chesty's fault," Flo persisted.

"I'll be the judge of that, Miss." Springer had been waiting a long time for his revenge, and had allowed himself to believe that the horse had picked him personally as an enemy.

"If you hadn't tried to break Chesty like an outlaw bronco he wouldn't have spooked so easy."

"Now you're tellin' me how to ride a horse! M'am, I'll take orders from Ed but not from a snip of a girl. Move aside!" Springer started to give the black some rein.

BBRICK FLAHERTY preferred to stay out of the argument, being a new man, but by Lannigan's own word he was given Chesty's care and training for the race. He hadn't believed any man would deliberately go out and beat a horse in revenge, and yet that was obviously Springer's intent. "Hold it, mister, I'm taking over Chesty from here."

"Don't butt in, stranger. It ain't healthy." Springer threw a baleful look on Brick.

"I'm not butting in. Chesty's my worry now, and I say whipping won't help him." He thumbed in the direction of the barn. "Ride on back and hang up your toys."

"I'm foreman here," Springer snapped. "I ain't takin' orders from no red-headed tramp wrangler."

"You want to go on being foreman, mister, you'll get out before I skin you." The two men had equal tempers, and each knew a fight was on the make. Brick turned a brief smile at Flo. "This is likely to turn into something not fit for a lady, Miss Lannigan." She looked as if she might be stubborn and stay. His smile said no. She wheeled her horse and rode toward the house.

"All right Springer, now we don't have to show off for the boss's daughter. Supposing you put up the whip and we'll let Ed Lannigan settle it when he comes in tonight. But don't get me wrong—if you

like a fight I'll sure be happy to oblige."

Springer took a split second to make up his mind. He reached into the sack and pulled out the whip. With a flip of a strong wrist he curled it back and brought it whistling over his shoulder toward Brick.

Brick hadn't anticipated such a move and was caught off-guard. He kned his horse to swing away but the foot-long cracker on the whip burned through the thin shirt across his shoulders and lifted a piece of hide from his neck.

The whip sailed out again as Brick frantically pushed the roan in to close the space. Four feet of braided cowhide whined around his upper arms. A stout jerk pulled him out of the saddle.

Brick fought the knotted cracker and burst it by main strength. Springer tried to goad the black in to trample down the grounded Irishman. The black refused so Springer left the saddle with a lunge, bringing his weight full against the head of the rising Brick. Springer's fists pounded short wicked blows, cased in skin-tearing work gloves.

Brick nailed one of the flying fists and used its speed and his strength to throw Springer sidewise. On his feet again, Brick forgot the sting of the whip and his growing crop of cuts and bruises. Springer was no good without the advantage. He fell for Brick's first feint. Brick sank a good left into the middle of the barrel body, and then worked on the face until the red ran bright and the man sagged to the ground.

Springer sat there panting and glowering through swimming eyes. His thoughts were easy to read. Brick saw the quick growth of a wish for treacherous revenge—the same feeling the man harbored for the horse that had thrown him.

Brick remembered his fight-studded past. Some men he fought and then they were his friends for life. Some, like Springer, fought, and if they lost, they waited only for an ambush to even the score. Men like that had to be beaten all the way down until their fear broke their desire.

Springer needed more. Brick looked at the bloody head and hated to go on. But it had to be. He reached down to drag the man to his feet. Then he saw the gun

and Springer's broken smile and his hand flashing down.

There was no time for speculation. Brick's right hand smoked up from knee level and caught Springer in the throat, nearly strangling him. The gun fired into the ground and Springer dropped again.

Brick waited a long time—he didn't know how long. He stood there waiting for Springer to rise or show sign of fight. He lay there, struggling for breath, only wanting to live, not wishing for any more punishment.

Ed Lannigan found them there like that.

In the morning Springer was paid off and warned by Lannigan personally. "You're through here, Springer, and if you ever show up in the Red Hill country I'll turn Flaherty loose on you again. Or if I see you first I'll shoot you down. I'd shoot any man who'd mistreat a good horse. I mean it and you know it. Ride out before I change my mind and get my guns."

Chapter III

LAST MILE

BRICK FLAHERTY launched Chesty's training program in secrecy and kept it that way. For days on end Brick patiently won the big horse's confidence by just watching him and talking in friendly terms like he'd talk to a brother.

In time, the chestnut began looking for Brick's daily visit and expected a pat or a piece of sugar or a hunk of apple. No one was surprised the day Brick saddled Chesty and rode off. Then the real secrecy began.

Brick asked Lannigan to fence off a remote piece of pasture where he and Chesty could work without interference and spying eyes. They found such a place in the hills, big enough for long runs, and Lannigan ordered all the hands to stay away.

Only one pair of eyes watched the curious training of the skittish mile-eater. They belonged to Flo Lannigan and she considered herself very clever to eavesdrop this way without being discovered. She found a wonderful place in a shadowy niche between two boulders.

She marveled at Brick's ability to glue

himself to the big animal at such break-neck speed. Chesty had a way of throwing his head as if to toss off the control of the man and show some real speed. Brick compromised and let the horse do as he pleased as long as he followed the lead of the rein.

One day Brick went alone to Rincon. He bought some things and picked up a package the express agent had been holding for him. That afternoon he packed back two mysteriously bulky packages. Flo was openly curious.

"What's in them, Brick?" she asked and itched to open the wrappings herself.

Brick grinned and put her off. She was going to insist. "I've got a right to know if it's anything to do with Chesty. Chesty's really my horse, you know."

"Yes, Brick knows, Flo." Lannigan came into the ranch kitchen and interrupted. "Let him be."

"But dad, I want to know." She was half teasing. She used her prettiest smile and the full power of her eyes on Brick.

Brick Flaherty thought the time had come. He swallowed and winked at his boss. "I hope this is all right with you Mr. Lannigan." With that he cupped Flo's chin in his hand and kissed her. He held her chin long enough to say: "You'll know about one of the packages pretty soon when you watch from the boulder." His knowing grin was positively insulting.

Flo flamed to the roots of her dark hair. She looked at her father, expecting him to be angry. His upper lip shortened with the spread of his frank smile. "So that's the way it is."

"No!" Flo Lannigan flung out of the room.

"You love her, Brick?" The question came from Lannigan when she was gone.

"Yes sir. I guess I shouldn't have done that."

"A man with your name and your hair has to do it that way," Lannigan said. "You win this race and I think you can win her."

"We'll win." Brick was positive.

"Well, son, if you don't that's your hard luck. The Box A won't be worth marrying."

"You mean you bet that big, Mr. Lannigan?" Brick asked.

"Yep," was the brief answer. "You

better start calling me Ed. You and I might be out looking for a job a week from Saturday."

"We'll win."

"Chesty's coming along good, then?"

"Fine. This week is the big test. I'm trying some new things with him. Do you want to hear about them?" This was the first time Brick and Lannigan had discussed the subject.

"No Brick. Don't tell me. I know enough to satisfy me." The flat words stirred a curiosity in Brick. The question showed in the widening of his keen blue eyes.

Lannigan continued: "I knew you were something different from a cowhand the first day we met. Your funny lingo, your shorter stirrups, and your size. Don't get me wrong, I don't want you to prove to me how big you really are. You were a professional jockey in the past once, weren't you?"

Brick nodded and realized that no observant man could have been fooled by his Western clothes. "I'll tell you something else too, Mr. Lan—I mean Ed. I killed a man once—in a horse race."

LANNIGAN showed no sign of distress.

Brick had harbored this secret for a long time, had hoped he'd forget it. Now he knew he'd have to tell this man—this man who was betting so much on him. "I levered him out of his saddle when he tried to grab my bridle. He broke his back in the fall."

Lannigan was quiet until he knew Brick wanted some comment. "If you did it, Brick, I know it needed doing. Your past, right or wrong, is nothing to me. See you later." He left.

Brick had many reasons for doing his best with Chesty, and he did do his best. The horse, too, seemed to catch the importance of the coming crisis. He held his head higher and his stride seemed to lengthen and he put his heart into every test run.

Flo come out in the open during that last week and even helped Brick with the crucial final training. Brick knew the story of the stock whip from the year before and was determined that no such ruse would win his race. One day he brought

a tremendous whip with him to the high pasture.

He handed it to Flo. "This was one of the packages. Bought it in Rincon."

When Chesty was warmed up, and horse and rider were in complete understanding, Brick called to Flo:

"Crack the whip when we get to the middle of the run!"

Flo got set but her heart raced uncontrollably, anticipating what Chesty would do when he heard the whip. She crossed her fingers and prayed.

Chesty flung himself into the run as usual. He roared down toward the place chosen for the test. The girl stepped out and let fly with the whip. Chesty's bulging eyes caught the coiling over the girl's shoulder.

Brick released the extra tension he had taken on the reins. Then the rifle-sharp crack came. Chesty unseated Brick and nearly threw himself to the turf wrenching himself away from the whip.

At last he came to Brick again, but with distrust. Brick and Flo worked early and late to overcome the fear and bring back the speed.

Saturday noon, the day of the race, was stuffy and overcast. And one of those late summer storms hung low and threatening. Red Hill and its citizens paid no attention to the weather and gave over to their usual thirsts for liquor and excitement.

News of Brick's secret training had leaked out, and the word got around that Visser was planning something special. Every man wished he could watch the middle part of the race where it passed by the butte but there was an unwritten law that that area was sacred to the skulldugger of the race horse pilots. What happened there was the property and legend of two men, no other eyewitnesses.

At the Corners was only a handful of men, just enough to see to a fair start. Dutch Wurtel and Ed Lannigan were there too, of course, to give their riders last minute instructions and to pass a last word about their bets.

AFTER a private word with Bud Visser, Wurtel went over to his horse. Big Boy was a gleaming bay, high and powerful, built for the long run without

the touchy temperament of Chesty. Wurtel loved the horse, and for good reason—it had won him several thousand dollars in the last years of racing against the Box A entries. He patted Big Boy's neck and his bristly face actually looked tender as he whispered to the bay.

"What you telling him, Dutch?" Lannigan called.

"I told him he could eat every blade of grass on the Box A if he'd win this race for me. And he will, too."

"He'll get Box A grass all right when he loses. He's in our bet, isn't he?"

"Yep, I'm bettin' every head of stock on the 33 against the measly pickin's on the Box A. It's a topheavy bet but I'm that sure o' winnin'." Dutch's confidence stuck out all over him. He held a secret. A spy of his had been at Chesty's pasture the day of the whip.

Lannigan brought him down a peg with: "Wouldn't like to bet the rest of your shoestring spread would you?"

Dutch's beard fell open. When he made himself believe what he'd heard, the avarice in his eyes practically stuck out. "Yours against mine, huh? Back that bet up, mister."

Lannigan had his deed in his hand. "Might as well go whole-hog. A man without stock is no rancher. Hey George!" He called George Martin, the banker and one of the starting judges, over. "George, hold this deed in escrow for the winner. With you as witness, I'll trust Dutch for his."

"No, Ed," the conservative banker said. "This is too big a bet. I won't be a party to it."

"You ain't got a choice, George," said Dutch. "33 and Box A are ninety percent of your business no matter who owns 'em. Take Ed's deed. You've got mine in your safe anyhow." That closed it. Dutch looked around. "Ed, where's your hothead horse and that Irish monkey-on-a-stick?"

"It isn't race time yet. Keep your shirt on."

At that moment Brick came down the road from the Box A with Flo Lannigan riding beside him. Chesty, held in strongly, tossed his head and would not let the girl's horse step ahead of him.

The chestnut seemed apprehensive of

the gray sky. Brick was dressed in tight pants and high black boots that were strange to these Western men. He wore a yellow silk shirt buttoned at the neck. The boots were old and soft, the clothes stained and faded.

"Just in time, Flaherty," George Martin called to him. "Ten minutes."

"So that's what else was in those packages, eh, Brick?" Lannigan asked, looking



Dutch Wurtel. . .

at the boots, pants, and shirt, and the crop that Brick held in his hand.

"Mostly," Brick answered, not offering to say what else.

Visser mounted Big Boy and called over. "Flaherty! You said six weeks ago a man who called you a dude rider and a squirt had to prove he was a better rider and a better fighter'n you. You're gettin' both today, squirt—the ridin' lesson comes first."

Brick looked contemptuously over at the man he had already whipped once. He noticed the ill-concealed bulge under the man's shirt. Flo saw it too and her eyes widened. Brick shrugged.

"You and Chesty ready, Brick?" Lannigan asked.

Brick nodded and then changed his mind. He was enjoying making Visser and Wurtel nervous with his deliberation. "One more thing," he said.

"What's wrong now, dude?" This came from Wurtel.

Brick pointed at the silk scarf around Flo Lannigan's neck. "Ed didn't furnish me with colors. A man can't ride without his colors. Let me have that, Flo." She

blushed as she untied it and handed it to him. He had all eyes as he quietly tied it over his neckband. "Let's go!"

THE starting of the race was informal. George Martin gave the owners of 33 and Box A enough time to get a good headstart on the shortcut to Red Hill. They would get there in time to see the finish.

When Chesty and Big Boy were roughly neck and neck and headed in the right direction, George hollered: "Go!" and they were off.

Both Chesty and Big Boy started fast for large horses. The first part of the course was downgrade and easy going. Visser and Brick let their charges out. In half a mile they were still practically even, and their dust and the gloomy atmosphere shut them from view.

Brick had carefully gone over every inch of the route and he suspected this would be the first opportunity for Visser to try something. He was right. Visser leaned out a little, took off his hat and flapped it at Chesty's eyes, meanwhile letting out a blood-curdling, "Yoweeeee!"

Chesty ogled him and quickened his pace to take the lead. Brick did not restrain him as he had learned Chesty's endless energies would carry him as fast and far as he pleased. And besides, Brick was anxious to put distance between Visser and himself.

Visser quirted Big Boy and began to close the gap. Chesty stretched out some more. More quirting by Visser. Each challenge was accepted by Chesty and bested. Soon he was pulling slowly away. Brick looked back.

Visser was giving Big Boy hell with the quirt and struggling with his shirt front at the same time. The whip appeared and Visser held it coiled in his left hand while he worked on the horse for more speed. Big Boy had a great heart and rangy legs and he gave his rider his best. He managed to pull well up on Chesty and Brick. Brick prayed.

CUH-RACK! The snapper at the end of the whip sounded over Chesty's rump. His ears went down. Brick's grip did not tighten but he set his feet and legs for the leap. Chesty whistled and lept forward, sticking to the road. He was cured.

Visser cursed. Wurtel's spy, ex-foreman Max Springer, had not stayed to watch the balance of Chesty's training.

In the last precious days, Brick and Flo had overcome the fear of the whip and replaced it with a desire on Chesty's part to lunge forward at all sharp sounds. They had tried whips and guns and anything else that would make a loud noise.

Visser tried the whip again. Same results.

Chesty and his rider were running away now and when they came to the rise that led to the curve around the butte, Brick was sure they could coast in winners.

Brick did not let up, however. His years on the track had taught him a race isn't won until your nag's whiskers have passed the judge's eye. He talked to Chesty and told him to ease up. The animal almost seemed to understand. His ears perked and turned, and his pace let up a little. He had learned to love and trust the soothing tone of Brick's voice.

Then it was that the man jumped out from behind a rock. Even though he had no hat and his hair and six-weeks beard were shaggy, Brick knew it was the bird-legged, barrel-bodied Max Springer.

Chesty was taking shorter, more powerful strides up the steepest part of the rise. Max was barely thirty yards ahead. He held a gun in his hand and gestured wildly with it. His eyes were crazy in his red face which was even redder than Brick remembered.

He called, hoarse and loud: "I'll kill that damn horse, and you too, Irisher!" He started to fire at them. He was out of his mind with rage and the memory of his beatings at the hands of the two who approached. Otherwise his shooting might have been better.

BRICK called on Chesty to go faster. He didn't need to—the horse recognized an enemy and set out to run him down. Brick switched ends with his quirt so that the loaded handle swung heavily down. Max's last shot nipped Chesty's ear at point-blank range. The quirt made a short loop and caught Max's ear.

"Quiet boy!" Brick called to Chesty. The big chestnut felt the pain in his ear and tried to run away from it. He forgot his training and his love for Brick. He

left the road, and the redhead on his back had a struggle to keep in the saddle.

For precious minutes Brick talked and soothed as the big animal stumbled over rocks and chuckholes. A glance backward showed Visser on Big Boy topping the rise and heading for the level stretch that would carry them to the winner's line and the end of Box A and Lannigan.

It was the sight of Big Boy taking the lead that brought Chesty to his senses again. Almost magically he stopped fighting the bit and leveled out for the road again. Big Boy had taken the lead by a hundred and fifty yards when the chestnut made his new bid. If his heart would last he would not let that horse run ahead of him.

The final three-quarters of a mile were in full sight of the crowd in Red Hill. Their shouts came out clearly in the still hush before the impending storm. High, noiseless lightning flashed briefly and let them see the two straining horses and the men plastered to their backs.

Lannigan and his daughter watched Chesty and the easy-riding Brick pull closer and closer to the 33 entry. A half-mile to go and the horses were hugging the center of the road, side by side. Lannigan thought he saw, in the gloom, Visser trying to butt the lighter Brick off his saddle.

They came on. The flickering lightning stopped and the cloud cover brought almost total darkness. A thunderclap started a sudden deluge of rain, obscuring even the shadows of the racers and drowning the sound of the horses' hoofs.

Out of the murk came a redhead atop

a muddy chestnut horse. Trailing a little was the riderless Big Boy, still fighting for the lead. The shout in the crowd's throat died.

Brick found Ed Lannigan and Flo in the shelter of the wooden awning at the side of the mercantile store.

"Brick!" she called. "Brick! What happen? Where's Visser? What did you do with Chesty?"

"Chesty's at the stable. He's all right." Brick looked beaten and tired as well as wet.

"Well—" Lannigan started in a quiet voice.

"I know what you're going to ask, Ed," Brick said. "Will you believe me if I tell you that you can collect your bet honest?"

"You didn't help Visser out of his saddle, then?"

"No. Big Boy stumbled. Visser fell on soft ground—I think they'll find he's not hurt bad."

"Oh Brick, I do love you!" It was a wet, rainy, heavenly kiss. "But tell me what else was in those packages?"

He wanted to kiss her again. She pushed him away. "Tell me, Brick."

Brick fumbled in the pocket of the limp yellow shirt. "Just this." He pulled out a simple, worn gold wedding band. "My mother's. It was the only nice thing she owned in her life. She gave it to me before she died—said it would bring me luck."

"Did it?"

"I'll say it did—if you'll wear it."

She put out her left hand.

Lannigan coughed. "Think we can get a parson out in this rain?"

THE END



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He could feel the hot lead fan
his cheek. . . .

SUNDAY midnight was the ideal time for the job. The air was sharp, still and clear, the first fall of November snow coming down light under the bright half-moon showing over the fang-like peaks of the Lone Walls.

The blanket of white was no more than six or seven inches deep even in the light drifts on the south slopes of Deadline Pass, and yet the burly, duck-legged man in the wool-lined old mackinaw, walked

Dead Shot

By **BART CASSIDY**

Old Pike Farmer, sheriff of Rattlesnake Bend, took great pains in braiding a hang-rope to twist about his best friend's windpipe—only to find it fit a lot neater around his own damned neck!

gingerly, carefully picking his way. He had to, up here just above the timberline where only tall rocks, dwarfed clumps of pine and low brush hugged the hard bare ground.

Although he, himself, would be the head man to investigate the kill when it was discovered, Pike Farmer was taking no chances whatever. He had waited for more than eleven years for this thing—more than eleven years of brooding, when fear crowded him to the bone, always knowing that a deadly shadow loomed over him.

He had halted many times after leaving Rattlesnake Bend and leaving his tall old bay hidden down there in the timber now a mile behind him. His pale, shifty eyes had studied every clump of pines, every rock-pile or dense patch of brush as if expecting danger lurking behind them.

Now he stopped for the last time just two hundred yards below the sod-roofed log cabin in the mouth of the pass, and turned once more to look down at the few lights still showing two miles away—down there in the snake-like bend of the river. In a few moments he was swearing under his breath. No one, damn it, could possibly suspect that he had slipped out of town.

Rattlesnake Bend was as dead as a can of salted mackerel. A long-needed spell of peace and quiet had finally settled over everybody and everything—even the curs that liked to trot up and down the main street or lie under the benches in the shade of the wide-spreading old cottonwoods.

Rattlesnake Bend had been through hell for the past two weeks—a thundering, roaring and yowling spell of hell-lifting that had its beginning when the first couple of gangs of cowboys and buckaroos had come banging into town in a cloud of dust from the late fall roundups in the long, wide Lone Valley and the canyons southward.

The last couple of gangs—unable to resist liquoring out their spree all day Sunday, had left town only at nightfall, most of them whiskey-sick monkeys looking like bleary-eyed bums in their saddles. Some had pawned new fifty-dollar hats, boots, saddles and even sixshooters and rifles to black-bearded old

Buck Long and lean old Dave Bender.

Aided by thin, short and rheumatic old Sam Love, keeper of the big stone jail at the head of the street, and young, red-headed Lance Rowdy, his deputy, Sheriff Pike Farmer had managed to retain some shadow of law and order in spite of all the yelling, wolf-howling, free-for-all fighting and gun-shooting—a near all-out reign of utter damnation that always struck Rattlesnake Bend after every spring and fall roundup. A sheriff just couldn't let 'em bust up ever' damn' thing in sight without somebody going to jail to pay for it.

Farmer, himself, had whanged four men over their thick and whiskey-wild heads with his old Peacemakers to keep them from killing other men. Because he was young, a new deputy and untried, Lance Rowdy had looked easy, and had turned out to be the dynamite that had surprised and addled them. His almost perpetual grin had fooled seven men until he had knocked them on their ears in Buck Long's Saddle Horn just below the one-horse red-brick bank.

After the Saddle Horn let-loose, Rowdy was still to be tried. He had been forced to shoot a long Colt out of the hand of a wild-eyed buckaroo in the Boot & Spur, Dave Bender's big, log-walled joint a few doors above the bank. No one had blamed him for that, least of all the buckaroo himself when he was sober the next morning.

THE only real trouble had come from short and bottle-bellied Stagecoach Phil Drew—the dangerous old two-gun reprobate who would be drunk and asleep in the line-cabin ahead with its poled corral and little log stables. Before being forced to take the old man's fighting tools and lock him up, Lance Rowdy had knocked him cold last night with a short, solid right to the jaw.

It had been the first time any man had dared to lift a hand against Stagecoach Phil Drew without getting shot for it, and it had long been the old devil's boast that no man on earth would ever throw him in a jailhouse. He was a proud cooter, high-headed, going on strictly sober spells that sometimes lasted for a full year.

Whiskey made him wild, a trouble-

maker who had to be coaxed and petted out of town when pitching a stampede. Many times in the past Pike Farmer had taken it upon himself to lock up thoroughly innocent men to keep the old heller from killing them.

No man in Lone Valley or on the high rangelands of the surrounding mountains had liked Pike Farmer for those dealings. Fair play was fair play, and locking up innocent men was not that at all—not when it was perfectly clear to all concerned that it was old Drew, himself, who belonged behind the bars. Last night Drew had been put there, raging and foaming at the mouth like a madman, and kept in jail until late Sunday afternoon. Everybody would remember what the old man had said to Lance Rowdy when he was let go.

"I'm givin' yuh till tomorrow," the old man had howled. "Come the sun straight overhead, I'm a-ridin' in to kill yuh, if yo're here when I come."

Farmer stole on, knowing exactly what he was going to do. Lance Rowdy would have to go to jail. The Buckhalter gang—big horse and cow outfit in Red Wolf Basin north of the pass—would probably want to lynch him. Many others would not like the way the kill was made, and yet Pike Farmer could see his young deputy getting out of it in a few years. Rowdy was young and could take it.

That thought was in mind when Farmer reached the cross-logged corner of the cabin and stood there, breathing heavily. One did not have to listen too closely to hear the snores inside. A few moments of listening told the sheriff that they were rising and falling steadily. Now he could steal to the little window in the south end of the cabin and take a careful look inside.

It was about as he had expected. Too old to drive stage any more, Drew always kept a jug of whiskey up here. His job of keeping cattle and horses pushed back to the north or south paid him twenty a month and his grub, and he lived here like a boar in a pen, the floor always a mess, empty meat and bean tins often flung into the corner, clothing hanging on nails in the wall or dropped on the floor.

Feet toward the front door in the west wall of the cabin, old Drew was lying in front of a blazing log fire in the crooked

fireplace at the north end of the room. It looked as if he had fallen there on his back, a bundle of dirty clothing under his head for a pillow, a moth-eaten old buffalo robe pulled over him. At his left side was a pail of water and a gallon jug half-full of whiskey.

Stagecoach Phil Drew would never know what hit him. That thought gave steel to the sheriff's tensed muscles as he eased on, remembering a big knot-holt in the door. One or two careful shots here would forever end the thoughts of some day having to go back to the southwest and face the hangman's rope that had been waiting for nearly fourteen years now.

The trial had been fair, the last recourse taken by a man known in those days as Jim Ladner, now the sheriff of Rattlesnake Bend going under the name of Pike Farmer. Drew alone could point to his past, and the old devil had been mean enough to threaten him many times when his tongue had become hot with drink.

When he came to the hole in the door he seemed as steady as a rock. A long Peacemaker stole upward, the butt in his right hand, left hand gripping the barrel to make certain there would be no nervous sound of the muzzle bumping the door. Stagecoach Phil slept with a Colt at his side, a man with hair-trigger ears, one eye asleep, the other awake and watching.

He was right in line with the knot-hole when the sheriff fired. Only half the noise sounded outside, the rest muffling inside, and yet it could have been a cannon going off in the utter stillness. Farmer saw the blood fly. He wheeled and started to run, but a thought turned him back. A glance showed him that his bullet had struck the old man on the point of the chin, ranging up through the head.

A YOUNGER man would be more nervous. That thought had turned him. A younger man would fire more than one shot, making absolutely sure of his kill. He triggered two more roars through the hole, waited a few seconds, and fired again. Almost forgetting the important part of it, he stepped back, ejecting the four empty shells and the two remaining loads in the old Peacemaker. Then he

reloaded and was turning away when he heard a beat of hoofs coming around the south end of the cabin.

This was sudden hell— Unreal and out of place, a nightmare cutting in on the show. He wheeled toward the northwest corner of the hut. Before he reached it a big man on a tall horse was turning the corner behind him. Behind that man were three others, riders who seemed to have come from nowhere. A wild crying lifted:

"Somebody's been a-murderin' ol' Phil! I see 'im through the window, the blood all over hell."

Pike Farmer might have gone on. Once the ring-leader of the most desperate gang of horse and cattle thieves on the Texas border, he had plenty of nerve when it came to a showdown. Being sheriff here for years, able to stand behind his badge and gangs of possemen ready to jump to his bidding, must have taken something out of him. He lost his head. Before he realized it he had wheeled and fired.

Being sheriff of Rattlesnake Bend might have softened him in many ways, but it had not spoiled his aim. He saw the big man on the rearing horse suddenly lurch high in his stirrups, got a glimpse of him dropping reins and clutching his stomach, and the man was coming down, the horse wheeling from under him.

Now Farmer fired a second shot, then wheeled and fled, hearing a man crying out in pain behind him. He passed the end of the corral in front of the little barn, and scurried on out among the rocks, a few clumps of brush and a dwarfed pine here and there.

Behind him he had left them addled for the moment, one man dying on the hard ground, another shot through the shoulder.

The dying man's horse was coming on, snorting, kicking up his heels as he headed for the mouth of the pass. That in itself was enough to tell the fleeing man that it was a Buckhalter horse trying to head back to home range.

It was more by accident than anything else that Farmer managed to get his hands on the horse's cheek-strap as the wild-eyed fool came charging up behind him and tried to brush past. As though all of it was happening as fleetingly as a terrifying dream, he found himself in the saddle, the reins in his hands.

Men yelled behind him. A shot tore at him, then another and another. He whipped three shots of his own back at the flashing flames, and heard a horse bawling as it was struck, staggered, and sent plunging to its knees with a bullet in a shoulder bone.

Now it was get away, and get fast! In the pale light he had recognized the horse and the handsome saddle he was riding. The horse belonged to Big Buck Miller, old Dude Buckhalter's top-hand bronc rider. Miller and the others had gone back to the ranch to wheedle a little more money out of old Dude.

With no great demand for them on the range right now, old Dude had probably given it to them to get them out of his sight. Once returning to town they would be certain to find a poker game going on either in the back room of the Boot & Spur or the Saddle Horn. Burning with the usual thirst, they had stopped here, knowing they would be able to get a drink from old Stagecoach Phil—and they had slammed head-first into this!

But it could not matter a great deal after all. The horse under him was fast, and Farmer knew the slopes as well as any man could have known them. He was soon at the timberline, plunging into it. In a short time he was back beside his tall old bay.

Now it was only a matter of changing horses and getting on to whisk himself in the clear. He gave the long reins of Miller's horse a few quick waps around the saddle horn, turned him back up the slope, and gave him a furious slash of a quirt that had been hanging on the saddle. The half-winded horse snorted back up the slope.

TWO of the tough Buckhalter riders were still behind him, coming down the slope, trying to spot him. He could guess who they were. One would be Long Frank Watson, for he had recognized Watson's wide, new white hat back there in the weak moonlight. The other would be Charley Dudley, always a little, twisted monkey shape in the saddle of the biggest damn horse on the range.

Dudley and Watson were always together, bosom friends drunk or sober—and the man who had yelled and cursed

back there would be Sam Sneed, always to be found right at Big Buck Miller's heels.

But what could two pistol-tough riders of the Buckhalter outfit mean to a man who had once whipped great herds of cattle and horses back and forth across the Rio Grande, dodged Texas Rangers and the pick of the Mexican rural police and slipped like a greased puma through their fine traps and schemes?

Long Frank and the twisted Charley were only a couple of rangeland yokels, neither smart enough to be jailed for it. Jim Ladner of the border country had bounced scores of hard-riding men off his trail in the past, made fools of them, had turned one mob on another and left them to fight each other in the darkness and the brush!

He was soon out of the snow, but still in the timber. He started blinding his trail as he had blinded it going up the slope. By the time he had reached the rear door of the barn and corral behind the jail it would have been hard for an Apache scout to have trailed him even in broad daylight.

Now he could take his time. He slipped the horse inside, took off the saddle, and rubbed the bay's back as dry as possible with the saddle blanket. After all, there was not a hell of a lot of use in going to great pains now. When Long Frank Watson and Charley Dudley came they would make it like streaks to the front of the jail and start banging on the door to pour out their story.

In a few minutes he was inside. With no prisoners to worry about and old Sam Love having a long-needed night off, he was soon in his bunk in the northwest corner of the office. Lance Rowdy would be sound asleep in his room over the rear of the Boot & Spur.

Farmer had made it a point to wait and watch until his light had gone out down there. An hour after that had found him on the move, working his way up the slope.

It was bad, just too bad, maybe, to rope in another man on this kill, but one simply had to do things like this. The Jim Ladner of old had had the reputation of double-crossing his own men now and then to pull himself out of tight holes. It was the one reason why Phil Drew had hated him.

Phil Drew had not always been a stage driver who had five times shot his way out of holdups to come through with the mails. Under the name of Bill Ellis he, too, had ridden the border, and had spent two years in the pen down there before being released to come on up here. He had always blamed Jim Ladner, alias Pike Farmer, for it.

"An' others, too," he had often whispered to the sheriff. "Some bein' men yuh good as killed on the cow an' hoss-run trails. Some yuh good as hanged to save yore own hide. Set an' think about 'em, damn yuh. Yuh never had the natural born guts to shoot it out with me."

That part of it was over, done forever. Now a man could sleep at night when he was worn out from a long day's grind, and not be cringing in fear of what an old devil had whispered in his ear. Even now Pike Farmer could have gone to sleep, but it was not long before he heard hoofs coming up to the hitchrack in front of the porch.

He had already unlocked the front door. The pale glimmering of light still burned on the wide old spur-tracked desk in the opposite end of the room. When a fist pounded on the door he merely lifted himself to one elbow, waited a minute, and said one word:

"Come!"

It was exactly as he had guessed it. Long Frank Watson opened the door and stepped inside. The twisted monkey that was Charley Dudley was right behind him. At a growl from Watson he scooted on across the room and turned up the light on the desk.

"Phil Drew was killed tonight, Pike," Watson said. "Big Buck Miller was shot, too, right through the belly. He was just about dead when I left him up there in the mouth of the pass with Sam Sneed. Sam's hit, too, but it's only in the flesh."

"Look here, now!" Farmer whipped back his blankets and rocked himself to the side of the bunk, stocking feet smacking down on the floor. "I guess yuh fellas are still drunk. What'n hell are yuh sayin'?"

"Yuh heard me in the first place, Pike." In the better light now, Watson was looking at him through mere slits of flint-gray eyes. "But I guess I can tell yuh agin."

Somebody sneaked up there on the pass an' shot old Phil.

"We was comin' back to town. Just as we come outa the mouth of the pass we heard the shots. Through the window we saw the old man lyin' there, the blood spoutin'. Buck got to the corner an' let out a yell. The killer was still there, an' he popped a bullet in Buck's belly. The rest ain't much to tell."

BUT he told it carefully, missing no detail of it while the sheriff sat there staring at him with his mouth open, mock surprise filling his eyes. Now and then he snapped his mouth closed, lifted a finger, and asked a question.

"This is bad, Frank!" He reached for his trousers on a nearby chair, glancing at Dudley. "Charley, go wake up old Doc Bill Wright for me and saddle a horse for 'im. We've got to get up there on the pass. Maybe Doc Bill can do something for Big Buck yet."

"I figure not." Watson pushed himself into a chair. "Buck was goin' fast when I took a few seconds to look at 'im. I guess that musta give the killer time to get the jump-run on us. We fired shots, like I said, an' that ended it."

Dudley moved toward the door. "First take a look in the back room of the Boot'nspur. There's a light in the window. He's maybe there in a slow hand of poker with Dave Bender, Lang an' Judge Blake."

"Who do yuh think would do that shootin', Frank?" Farmer was pulling on his boots as Dudley left the room. "Be fair now."

"No less'n twenty men, maybe,"

smirked the cowboy. "Maybe even you. Phil could be mean as hell when drunk. Ever'body thought he had somethin' on yuh, Pike." He nodded, eyes still narrow. "Now an' then he'd come right on out with it."

"Only when he was drinkin'." Pike Farmer knew that his face had gone pale. "He always had somethin' on somebody when he was drunk."

"But you would never go ahead and lock 'im up."

"I just didn't wanta have to kill him," cried the sheriff. "What'n hell are yuh drivin' at, anyhow?"

"Nothin'," shrugged the cowboy. "Just thinkin'. You axed who I thought mighta done it. Hell, if he'd talked to me like he talked to yore new deppity I'd a killed 'im, myself."

"Hold now, Frank." Farmer stabbed a mean finger at him. "Don't yuh start bein' a damn fool an' passin' hints that it mighta been Lance Rowdy who pulled that job. Lance ain't the kind to do a thing like that."

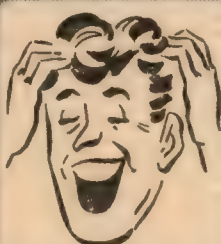
"Naw?"

"Naw, course not!" snarled the sheriff. "Don't go puttin' thoughts like that in people's heads. The average run of human bein' is only a damn fool at best. To get people to believin' an innocent man's done somethin' ain't right. It ain't right at all. No, sir, by hell, no."

"I was just tryin' to answer yuh." Watson grinned at him and started rolling a cigarette. "Us Red Wolf Basin fellas, I guess, was about the only true friends ol' Phil had left, an' he was a try to us at times. But the man who shot 'im killed 'im like a dry-gulcher, an' he killed a



**SCALP
FEEL TIGHT
AS A DRUM?**



**LET FITCH'S IDEAL
AND THE JIFFY RUB
LOOSEN IT UP**



**THEN LOOK AND
FEEL EXTRA
GOOD!**



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Buckhalter man with it. There's gonna be some red hell to pay, Pike. We ain't takin' a thing like that lyin' down.

"Look, Pike." He leaned forward in his chair, and the sheriff now noticed that he was keeping his right hand close to the butt of a Colt. "I ain't never a fella to keep the other fella waitin'. Whoever shot Stagecoach Phil rode a hoss back here to them stables behind the jail."

"What!" The sheriff's voice was almost a yell. "What'n hell—?"

"An' the hoss," cut in the cowboy, hand still close to that Colt, "is in them stables with his back wet. Pike, that hoss belongs to you. It's yore long-legged ol' bay, by God!"

"Hell alive!" groaned the sheriff, face old yellow parchment now. "The next thing yuh know yo'll be sayin' I shot 'im!"

"Maybe yuh did," Wilson grinned. "Either you or Rowdy—or somebody mighty, mighty close to this joint."

It was worse a few moments later. Charley Dudley came bobbing back. The first man at his heels was the short, thin and wrinkled Doc Bill Wright. Behind the doctor came old Judge Ben Blake, then Dave Bender, and then Lance Rowdy. Farmer stared at the deputy as if his jaw was dropping out. The judge spoke.

"Interrupted a mighty good poker game, Pike. Charley told us. I've been expecting it for years."

Farmer's voice was like a deep croaking as he stabbed a finger at Rowdy. "Where was yuh at all evenin', Lance? This monkey has been a-settin' here hintin'—"

"This monkey," cut in the cowboy, angrily, "ain't be a-hintin' at a damn thing. I said the killer came back to the stables behind the jail. Me an' Charley was able to see that much. We sneaked in them stables back there an' found a hoss with his back still wet. Pike ain't been on a hoss in days. Rowdy ain't, we know. But somebody has tonight, an' I ain't even thinkin' it coulda been ol' Sam Love."

"It couldn't have been Lance Rowdy," Judge Ben Blade was staring at the sheriff. "Confound it, Lance couldn't think of sleep after all the hell the town's been through. He's been playing poker with us for hours down there."

The doctor nodded with a smile. "And

he's been winning most everything that wasn't red hot or nailed down."

THIS was close, damned close. Pike Farmer's heart was pumping ninety miles an hour while horses were being saddled and brought up. He was pressing no points now, desperately steering clear of questions. With Rowdy suddenly cleared he could picture himself into it up to the eyes.

All he had to do was to keep cool. By morning he would have his own answer. When a man needed a goat he simply got himself a goat. Twenty men, as Watson had said, had had every reason in the world to kill Stagecoach Phil Drew. A man could be drawn right here in town. Some man who did not own a horse. Some man who would have a reason to hate both the sheriff and Phil Drew.

By the time they were nearing the cabin in the pass Pike Farmer had come to his decision. Old Rule Spencer, the blacksmith at the foot of the street, had had a hot argument with Drew over the shoeing of a horse Saturday afternoon. People had expected fireworks then. Old Phil had been nasty-mean. Spencer had the temper of a wild horse. A Buckhalter cowboy had kept them apart when the blacksmith started for Drew.

Spencer was the man, the ideal fit for the picture. Everybody knew that he had been tried for killing a man in Wyoming and had barely escaped the rope for a job something like this. He had no family and he slept in a little hut in the rocks and brush behind the shop—an early-to-bed, an early-to-rise man. By the time they reached the cabin in the pass Pike Farmer was mentioning his name.

"But I don't want to accuse Rule," he warned. "Never in the world an innocent man, gentleman."

"An' still he'd fit the fella I saw runnin'." Sam Sneed was suddenly helping, standing there gripping his wounded shoulder. "I'll damn nigh swear it was Rule. Why—why, Pike, he looks almost like yuh in the dark, duck-legged an' squatty. He don't like yuh, either. Yuh locked 'im up once for somethin' about not havin' a license, an' he was grumblin' threats for days afterwards."

(Continued on page 129)

FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



At sixty-four, Steve Dayton, South Dakota bad man, who had never served a minute of time for countless murders, shootings, and bank raids, was seized by a vigilante posse in the Little Rockies and accused of stealing a neighbor's horse. "But I tell you," gasped the retired bank bandit, "he sold it to me!" The vigilantes thought that quite a joke coming from a man with Dayton's reputation. They strung him up for rustling—just before the neighbor in question arrived to testify that he had sold him that horse!



Many of the Chinese immigrants who came to this country a century ago had a tough time adapting themselves to Western ways of living and working. Wong Teh, of Waulkon, Colorado, however, did it the easy way—instead of doing laundry or cooking in a hash house, he built a fleet of rickshaw taxis and made a good living hauling miners and their tools through the deep red mud to the quartz ledges. He charged five dollars for the standard trip—ladies carted free!

Whether or not the great Chicago fire was really started when Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern is a matter for historians to argue. What is certain is that on the night of March 16, 1864, the wooden-shackled mining village of Waterman, California, was burned down to the last cinder by a Mr. O'Malley's mule. The animal, being of a curious turn of mind, wandered into a saloon, seized a blazing kerosene lamp between its teeth, carried it back to the stable, and dropped it carefully into a hayrick full of straw.



Every man who has ever worn a sidearm knows that with the experience of carrying a gun comes the almost irresistible urge to pull the trigger. Often in the Old West, men were killed in arguments that only called for the exchange of a black eye for a sock on the jaw, merely because the participants were armed. In Bady's Saloon in Virginia City, for instance, one man's trigger-temper was set off when another, passing his table, accidentally knocked a glass into his lap. He started shooting blindly and immediately the fifty others in the saloon followed suit, spraying the place with 273 bullets and killing eighteen men.



Trouble-Shooter

By MAX KESLER



Chapter I

TWO MEN TO WATCH

LONG EXPERIENCE had taught Lew Mason that peace in the Cherokee Strip was merely a breathing spell between wars. Periodically, this brawling frontier flared up with long smoldering hates. Men died violently

—and someone emerged a temporary winner. After that, things quieted down for a while. Then it started all over again.

During the past five years, Lew Mason had come to accept this phenomena of

*Flaming Novel of
an Oil Strip Bonanza*



Three guns came up, three
shots blasted, three slugs ham-
mered at him. . . .

Three men would murder to win that wild Cherokee Strip bonanza: Blaine Jackson, fiery oil magnate, whose guts were a frontier legend. . . . Paddy Ryan, freight boss, whose wagon wheels were greased with honest men's blood. . . . And a hideout killer, who blotted out his past in a backfire of flaming oil!

progress—and to recognize the symptoms.

Now as he swung into Marlow's single dusty street, he knew that the breathing spell was over. Trouble was in the making. He sensed it in the shuttered windows of unpainted buildings—in the big tank wagons jamming the railroad shipping point—and in the sullen faces of the two hundred men lounging in front of the Marin Oil Company office.

Lew frowned. This job as trouble-shooter on Marin Oil's pipe line—now under construction—wasn't going to be an easy one. Bullwhip men—teamsters—were always dangerous. And this bunch, according to Blaine Jackson's letter, had already caused plenty of trouble.

In front of Marin Oil's office, Lew reined up and stared down at the scowling teamsters. No one spoke. Everyone's eyes were fastened upon Lew.

Lew hesitated. Now that Marin Oil's pipe line was nearing completion, these men were worked up to a fighting pitch. For that line, if finished, would wipe them out. Yet Lew felt no sympathy for them. They'd gotten themselves into this mess.

Four months before, they'd demanded a twenty-five cents a barrel increase for hauling crude oil to the Marlow shipping point. When the operators had refused, they'd withdrawn their huge wooden tank wagons from active hauling.

They had been sure of themselves—and with good reason. They and their big tank wagons were the vital connecting link between the oil wells and the shipping point. Without them, there was no way of getting the crude oil to refineries.

Within a week, the entire field had been paralyzed by the teamsters' move. Oil had filled storage tanks, over-run slush pits, and was lost by the thousands of barrels.

Operators had been forced to shut down pumping operations; hundreds of drillers, tool pushers, and roughnecks had been laid off—and the price of crude had skyrocketed.

Any man but Blaine Jackson would have come to terms in short order. But Jackson—a hard-bitten old timer who was president of Marin Oil and the acknowledged leader of the operators—had gotten his dander up.

He'd blasted back at the teamsters in no uncertain terms. If they wouldn't haul

crude oil—then, by God, he'd lay a pipe line to the shipping point and pump it in! It wasn't a new idea; it was being done in Pennsylvania. He'd wipe their damn jobs off the map.

And red-hot, he'd gone about the business of doing it. Within two weeks, construction of the line had begun. During the next four months he'd laid a network of some fifty miles of pipe—connecting the far-flung wells with an eight-inch main line.

The teamsters had made no move to interfere until a couple of weeks before. Then without warning, they'd struck in a series of lightning raids. They'd beat up construction crews and ripped out fifty-foot sections of pipe.

WHEN work had threatened to come to a standstill, Blaine Jackson had written Lew Mason in Guthrie, asking him to take over as trouble-shooter on the line. Idle at the time, Lew had agreed.

Hired, sight unseen, on the strength of his trouble-shooting work in Guthrie, he'd been ordered to Marlow for a council of war with Blaine Jackson. Now—after a hard ride from Guthrie—Lew was beginning to wonder if he'd done the right thing.

He hadn't particularly wanted this job to begin with. And only the fact that the name *Murphy* had been mentioned in Blaine Jackson's letter had made him take it. Just as he'd taken other jobs before.

He had an old score to settle with a man named *Murphy*. Five years was a long time—and there were a lot of miles between Pennsylvania and the Cherokee Strip. But he, Lew, had covered all of them—and a lot more. He'd never given up searching. Now, maybe this was the *right* *Murphy*. And if it was. . . .

Dismounting, Lew started inside the Marin Oil office. He tensed as a red-haired giant of a man blocked his path. With hulking shoulders, hard green eyes, brutal face, he carried a fifteen foot bullwhip in his hand—and acted as if he could use it.

Lew sucked in his breath—and his mouth tightened. He had not known that Paddy Ryan, the Black Irishman who'd started all that teamster trouble in Guthrie, was heading the fight here against

Marin Oil. Ryan would mean trouble.

"Just a minute, bucko!" Ryan wore a cocky smile of recognition on his face. His big body was hunched forward. "So Jackson's hired himself a trouble-shooter!"

"Get out of my way, Paddy," Lew said shortly. "I've got business inside."

Paddy Ryan didn't move. His hard green eyes flickered dangerously. "Get this straight, Mason," he said. "This ain't Guthrie. And these teamsters ain't goin' to fold up like *those* yellow-bellies did. You horn in on this fight—and you'll end up in boothill!"

Lew paused. He knew Paddy Ryan for what he was—a trouble-maker by nature. A man who loved violence and the testing of his own brute strength of others. Big or small, it made no difference to Ryan.

He controlled every teamster in the Strip. And he ruled with an iron hand. His leadership had been challenged many times, but never conquered. One aspirant he had stomped to death. Another he'd blinded with a bullwhip. He was not to be taken lightly—and Lew knew it.

"I don't scare, Paddy," Lew said harshly. "I beat your game in Guthrie; I'll beat it here. You started this trouble. Your men were already getting a damn good rate for that haul. Now you're bucking a thing you can't stop."

He moved toward the Irishman. "There's more to this thing than just freight rates. Pipe lines had to come sooner or later. They're cheaper in the long run—and faster. You've just hurried their coming. That's all.

"You can't hold back progress, Paddy. Don't try it. I've been deputized to protect Marin Oil's interests. I intend to do it. If you interfere with construction of that pipe line again, you're going to run into trouble. I'm warning you."

A LOW rumble from the teamsters told Ryan that they didn't like the way he was handling the situation. But Paddy always had an answer. Gripping the stock of the bullwhip, he began to back cautiously away.

"Uh-uh!" Lew closed in fast. "Don't try it, Paddy," he warned grimly. "I'll take that whip away from you and strangle you with it."

Ryan couldn't afford to let that kind of talk pass before his men—and he knew it. Cursing, he left his feet—his heavy drillers' boots lashing out for Lew's groin. But he was up against a man who knew rough-and-tumble fighting better than he did.

Lew saw it coming—and side-stepped. Paddy landed flat on his back, the breath knocked from him. Stunned, the teamsters stared down at him in stricken silence. Paddy had never missed that trick before.

Lew could have stomped the Irishman to death then. Had their positions been reversed, Ryan wouldn't have hesitated. But instead, Lew wheeled toward Marin Oil's office. On the porch, he turned. Ryan had staggered to his feet. He stood glaring now at Lew.

"Don't ever make that mistake again, Paddy," Lew said harshly. "Or the next time I'll kill you!"

Ryan gave him a long look. His eyes were flat and opaque. "I'll not make *that* mistake again," he said. "You won't have a chance the next time, Mason."

Shoving his way through the stunned teamsters, he headed toward the Gusher Saloon. He was still bent over with pain.

Silently, his men watched him go. Then they broke up into little groups, their belligerent spirits broken for the time being.

Sober-eyed, Lew stared after the Irishman. Before—in Guthrie—he and Paddy had clashed verbally. Paddy was always stirring the teamsters up—starting trouble. But this was the first time they had ever come to open blows.

Now things were changed. One of these days, he would either have to kill Paddy Ryan—or be killed. For theirs was no normal hatred, but the instinctive struggle of two powerful animals. Paddy Ryan acknowledged no master.

And in many respects, Lew Mason was like the Black Irishman. He bowed to no man.

Letting Paddy off so easy might have been a mistake. For to have whipped Paddy in a rough and tumble would have raised Lew's prestige. But by outwitting the Irishman, he had made a fool of him before his men. Now the teamsters' faith was likely to be shaken.

Turning, Lew made his way inside

Marin Oil's office. He looked around it.

Five men were gathered around a long table when Lew entered. A number of them—Paul Foley, a big, stolid man; Ira Chase, small, black eyed, intense; and Ray Stoddard, quiet and slow spoken—nodded their heads in recognition. It was Foley who introduced Lew.

"Gentlemen, this is Lew Mason—our new trouble-shooter. Most of you know him. All of you have heard how he handled that teamster trouble in Guthrie last year.

"Lew, meet Ira Chase and Vance Lawler. Vance is our construction engineer. You'll be working with him most of the time."

LEW turned a shrewd glance on the engineer. Lawler's handclasp was firm; so was the line of his jaw. But his age—no more than thirty—astonished Lew. He had expected an older, more experienced man.

Lawler must have sensed his thoughts, for the smile faded from his face. "Don't judge a man by his age, Mason," he said coolly. "He might surprise you. I happen to know pipe line construction."

"Sorry." Lew's smile was rueful. "I ought to have known Jackson wouldn't have hired you unless you did."

"Well, just remember that." Lawler's manner was hostile now. Hooking his hands into his belt, he suddenly changed the subject. "About this job, Mason. I've heard a lot about you. You're a lone wolf. You don't like to take orders."

He sat down on the edge of the conference table. "Well, that won't work here. I believe in coordination—not independent action. You'll get your orders from me, and I'll expect you to carry them out."

A strained silence fell over the group. Foley cleared his throat and Ira Chase shifted nervously in his chair. No one said anything.

"You and me sort of have different ideas about that, Lawler," Lew retorted. "Your job is to finish laying that pipe line. Mine is to see that the teamsters don't interfere with you. I'll take orders from no one—except Blaine Jackson himself."

"The hell you won't!" Lawler snapped

and came off the table. "You'll take orders and like it—or get out!"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Ray Stoddard stepped between them. "That won't get us anywhere."

For a tense instant they stood there sizing up one another. Then Lew said tightly, "Where's Blaine Jackson, Stoddard?"

Stoddard said he was in his private office with his daughter—and would they please calm down until Jackson could come out and settle matters.

Lew said it was all right with him.

After a moment, Lawler relaxed and sat back on the table. He scowled at Stoddard. "There's nothing to settle. Either Mason goes, or I go. I'll not stand for—"

Everyone turned as the door of Blaine Jackson's office swung open and a tall, dark-haired girl swirled through their midst like a miniature tornado. Pausing near the outer door, she shouted, "And you understand *this*, Blaine Jackson! Maybe you can bully your men. But you'll not tell *me* what I can do!"

Suddenly conscious of the curious eyes upon her, she snapped, "Well, what are you all staring at?" Then she slammed outside.

Scowling, a little leathery-faced man standing no more than five feet six emerged from the inner office. His lips thinned as he swept the group with a cold glance.

"I guess you all got a kick out of hearing the Old Man told off for a change," he remarked grimly. "Well, don't get any ideas. I'm *still* running Marin Oil."

No one said anything, and Lew seized upon the silence to study this fire-eating little man who had hired him sight unseen.

Although dwarfed by the men around him, there was a dynamic quality about Blaine Jackson that made one forget his size. He was not an old man—perhaps forty-five or fifty. He had a hawk nose and a pair of the keenest blue eyes Lew had even seen. His baggy suit in no way suggested that he was president of an oil company.

In short, success had not gone to Blaine Jackson's head. He was still the same rough, tough little driller who had pulled himself up by his boot-straps. A home-

spun man with but two loves—oil and his daughter, Sylvia.

WATCHING him, Lew saw the blue eyes harden as they settled on Vance Lawler. "I thought I told you to keep away from my girl, Lawler," the little man snapped. "You're no fit company for her. I know all about your kept woman in Ponca City. Now I'm warning you for the last time—stick to your job and leave Sylvia alone. Understand?"

"Just a minute!" Shoving off the table, Lawler faced Blaine Jackson. "I only work for you. Remember? Don't tell me what to do with my own time. I'll do what I damn well please!"

The silence was deafening. Even Lawler seemed uneasy. His hand tensed for a quick draw.

But Jackson made no move toward his own gun. He gave Lawler a steady glance and then said coldly. "You're through, Lawler. Get out!"

Lawler's face whitened. He wet his lips nervously. This was the best job he'd ever had. He didn't like the idea of losing it now. Not along with a good chance of marrying into a million dollars.

"Hold it, Blaine," he protested. "No need to go off half-cocked. I guess I sort of lost my head for a minute. If you'd rather I didn't see Sylvia—"

Blaine Jackson didn't let him finish. "You did more than lose your head, Lawler," he snapped. "You lost your job. Now get going!"

It took a full minute for the impact of Jackson's words to drive home. When they did, Lawler hitched up his pants and sneered, "If that's the way you want it, okay. Dan Murphy over at Murphy Oil can always use a good man.

"And maybe I can do him a favor. Maybe I can convince him that this pipe line of yours is impractical—and that it might be a good idea to meet the teamsters' terms."

Lew Mason's mouth tightened. He knew that Jackson was depending on pumping Murphy's and a half dozen other companies' crude oil through his line to cover construction costs. If Murphy met the teamsters' demands now, Jackson would lose that revenue—and that would break him.

"You're pretty damned low, aren't you, Lawler?" Blaine Jackson said evenly. "I might have expected that from you."

"Sure." Lawler grinned. "But here's something you *didn't* expect?" His fist lashed out for the little man's jaw.

Lunging forward, Lew grabbed the engineer's arm. "Get going, fella," he snapped. "Before you get in real trouble!"

Lawler cursed and tried to break free. Snapping on a hammer-lock, Lew propelled him toward the door. Lawler kicked back savagely at Lew's legs, then groaned and gave it up as Lew slapped on pressure.

Ray Stoddard grinned and opened the door. With a final shove, Lew sent the engineer sprawling into the street.

Lawler lay there a moment, stunned. Then, staggering to his feet, he shouted, "Damn you, Mason! I'll kill you if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Lew just stood there, waiting. After a moment, Lawler turned and limped toward the Gusher Saloon. Thoughtfully, Lew returned to the conference room. That made two men now—Paddy Ryan and Lawler—who would kill him the first chance they got. And if they ever happened to put their heads together. . . .

Chapter II

BLIND ALLEY

THE electric tension of the conference room was gone now. Everyone was talking at once. But they quieted at Lew's entrance. Lew strode to the table and sat down. He wasn't happy about the way things were going. He'd already gotten off to a rough start.

Blaine Jackson walked over and said, "Thanks," and shook hands. "Seems like I know how to pick my trouble-shooters."

Shrugging, Lew said, "Forget it." Then he asked who would take Vance Lawler's place as construction engineer.

Blaine Jackson gave him a shrewd glance. "How about you, Mason? The job pays a little more."

Lew shook his head, "I'm a trouble-shooter, Jackson. I'll stick to my own field."

"In that case, I guess Foley will have to take over." He turned to the big, stolid man. "How about it, Paul?"

Foley shrugged. "With the line almost completed—and with Mason here to back me up—I can do it."

"Good." Jackson turned back to Lew. "I think I mentioned this in my letter to you when you were hired. If not, here's the setup.

"We're running four-inch accommodation lines from Marin Oil's and a half dozen other companies' wells to a central dump tank. From there, we'll have a single eight-inch line to the shipping point here. The crude will be pumped, barreled, and shipped from here.

"This thing began as a desperate defensive move against the teamsters, Mason. But it's bigger than that now. This is progress. Oil pipe lines had to come sooner or later. And we're going to run this one through—come hell or high water! Now—any questions any of you want to ask?"

When no one answered, Jackson said, "All right—that's all. Paul, I'm depending on you to finish the job within the next two weeks. And you, Mason—keep those teamsters off his tail. We can't afford to be stopped now."

There was a harried look in the little man's eyes. Seeing it, Lew knew that Jackson was worried about Vance Lawler's threat to talk Murphy Oil out of this thing.

Turning to Foley, Lew said, "I'll see you at Lu Chee's around six-thirty in the morning. Meanwhile, I've got to buy a few things."

Outside, he headed for the nearest hardware store. There he purchased a half-dozen boxes of .45 shells.

"Going hunting?" the clerk asked, grinning.

"You might call it that," Lew replied grimly, and went out.

The clomp of his booted feet sounded loud on the boardwalk as he headed for the Driller Hotel. To the west, the sun was already half-hidden by the towering Sierra Ladrões. But the boisterous crowd that usually jammed an oil town's streets at sundown was conspicuously absent.

Marlow was like a ghost town. With close to five hundred men laid off due to the teamster trouble—and the teamsters themselves not working—there was little

but loose change in anyone's pockets.

Half the saloons were darkened for lack of business; the honkytonks and restaurants showed long rows of empty seats. And what men were in town had separated into two hostile groups. The oil field workers on one side; the cocky teamsters on the other.

Feeling was running high now against Paddy Ryan and his men. Drillers and roustabouts held the teamsters responsible for the shutdown of the field—and their loss of work. And they didn't like it.

Furthermore, for the past two weeks, the crews laying the pipe line had been subjected to vicious raids by the angry teamsters. They'd lay a half mile of pipe one day—and find it ripped out the next. Fights had become frequent and broken heads were a commonplace occurrence.

This sabotage of the line had practically halted construction. That was why Blaine Jackson had, in desperation, called Lew Mason in as a trouble-shooter.

LEW shook his head now. He knew the oil field crowd. Hot tempered, hard as nails, tough. They'd fight at the drop of a hat. Much more of this, and they'd blow up. And once they started, it would be hard to stop them.

Later, lying in his small, stuffy room at the Driller's, Lew's mind had turned to the real reason he had taken this job.

Dan Murphy. Lew's cigarette glowed redly in the darkness. The name hadn't been called Dan five years before. But a name could always be changed. Maybe this wasn't Bob Murphy either. He'd have to see that man first. For time and again during the past, he'd been disappointed. One more time couldn't make much difference.

His mind slipped back through the years. He'd met Bob Murphy one night five years before in Oiltown, Pennsylvania. He, Lew, had been young and impulsive then—and very drunk when he'd staggered into the Crown Block Saloon and began bragging about the two thousand dollars he'd saved to sink a wildcat well.

"Well, boys," he'd shouted. "It took me six years, but I did it. I'm here to buy a string of tools and set me up a rig. No more drilling for somebody else. Lew

Mason's going into business for himself!"

Mellow from too much liquor, he'd readily taken to the big, quiet man who'd sidled up to him at the bar. The man—Bob Murphy, he'd said his name was—had been well-dressed and flattering. He'd agreed with anything and everything Lew had said.

And Lew, thoroughly drunk, had liked it. He had gladly accepted Murphy's offer to help him buy his tools. Despite the advice of friends and their offers to go with him, Lew had stubbornly refused to listen. He and Bob Murphy had left together—he, blind drunk; Murphy, quietly sober.

Halfway to the Driller Supply House, Lew had suddenly realized that Murphy was no longer with him. As he'd turned, puzzled, something had crashed against the side of his head—and a blinding white light had swallowed him up.

When he'd come to, he was lying face down in an alley, his head splitting. His two thousand dollars was gone—and so was Bob Murphy.

Later, accompanied by the sheriff, he'd practically torn the town apart. But he had known that it was useless. Murphy had been a stranger. No one had ever seen him before, and he hadn't talked about himself. Bob Murphy had simply faded out of existence.

Yet there had been one slim clue. The railroad station master said that a man answering Murphy's description had bought a ticket for Guthrie, Indian Territory. He'd left on the one-twenty train.

That was that. But Lew Mason wasn't the kind to take the loss of six years hard work lying down. A week later, on borrowed money, he'd left Pennsylvania for Indian Territory and the Cherokee Strip.

By the time he'd reached Guthrie, Murphy had disappeared. Lew couldn't find him in the busy, teeming oil town. So Lew had gone on—from boomtown to boomtown, always searching.

He was driven onward by the bitter knowledge that Murphy had made a fool of him—that his own stupidity had cost him every dime he had in the world. And until he got it back, he'd never rest.

Because he had to live while he searched, Lew had taken jobs here and there. This was a new field—just opening

up. The pay wasn't as high as it was in Pennsylvania. And Lew was in a hurry to make money again.

Gradually, he'd accepted jobs where handy fists and a fast gun were needed—the pay was better. In the course of the years, he'd toughened—physically and mentally. His name became legion throughout the Strip as a man to handle any job too tough for others to.

HE MADE money. Long ago, he could have gone into wildcatting operations on his own. But finding Bob Murphy had by now become an obsession. It was a challenge to his intelligence and self-respect.

When men spoke of his shrewdness and efficiency, Lew was ashamed. He felt as though he were carrying on a cheap masquerade. He—a fool who had staggered into a saloon—bragging about packing two thousand dollars on him. Who had reeled down a dark street, blind drunk, with a man he'd never seen before and let himself get slugged and robbed of his money. These men that praised him now didn't know that—or they'd change their tune in a hurry. But *he* knew—and it haunted him.

There were a lot of Murphys in the Strip. Time and again, he'd followed promising leads—only to have them fizzle out.

Lying there in the darkness, Lew jettied smoke from his nostrils. Here was another lead. Would it, too, be false? It was hard to believe that the Bob Murphy he had known could have worked up to the presidency of a large oil company from that original two thousand dollar stolen bankroll. Still, the oil game was an unpredictable gamble.

And if this Dan Murphy *was* his man. . . . Well, that was the reason he had taken this trouble-shooting job instead of coming here free-lance. You just couldn't hit town, a stranger, and kill an oil company president. Not and get away with it.

First you had to become known yourself. You had to build up respect and good will. Then you could strike.

He ground out the cigarette. Tomorrow he would know whether this was just another wild goose chase. For tomorrow

he was going to call on Dan Murphy, president of Murphy Oil.

Sleep came to him then without difficulty.

Lu Chee's Restaurant was crowded when Lew Mason arrived the next morning. He spotted Paul Foley.

Foley looked up as Lew slid into the seat beside him. "Morning, Lew," he greeted. "You're early."

"Uh-huh." Lew said. He ordered hot cakes, a side of ham, and coffee.

While he ate, Foley explained the pipe line situation to him in detail. To date, they'd laid all but three miles of pipe. All of the feeder lines from the various companies' wells to the central dump tank had been completed.

"But those last three miles are tough going," Foley said, frowning. "Until a couple of weeks ago, the teamsters made no attempt to interfere. They did a lot of hollerin', but that's all."

"Now they've suddenly started giving us hell. Beating up the crews in town, taking pot shots at them on construction, and swooping down and tearing out pipe. Anything and everything to stop us."

He swiveled around and gave Lew a shrewd look. He hesitated, then blurted, "Damn it, there's something funny about this whole thing, Mason. Why'd they wait until the line was almost finished before starting trouble? Why didn't they raise hell from the beginning?"

"Unless—" He laid heavy emphasis on the word. "Unless someone wants Marin to sink a fortune in this line, and then sees to it that it's never finished. Someone who knows such a move would break Marin Oil—and Blaine Jackson with it!"

Lew shoved back his plate and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. "Know of anyone who hates Jackson that bad?"

"Hell," Foley replied. "Any man that comes up as fast as Blaine did makes enemies. You know that."

"What about Paddy Ryan?"

Foley shook his head. "Paddy's not smart enough for this thing. Besides, he'd lose his biggest freighting account if Marin Oil folded."

FOR a long moment, Lew sat there. A new, unpleasant thought was beginning to form in his mind. "This Murphy over

at Murphy Oil—Jackson ever have any trouble with him?"

Foley shrugged. "They've always been business rivals. And once or twice they've tangled. Murphy's got big ideas—and not the right sort. But you're forgetting that Murphy was the first to come in with Blaine. And he was the first to sign a contract to let Marin pump his oil through our line."

Lew's smile was tight. "If and when that line is completed. But suppose that Jackson—on the strength of those contracts—has sunk his money into a line he can't finish now because of the teamsters. With Jackson bankrupt, who would stand to gain? Murphy, of course."

"Hell, I never thought of that!" Foley swore softly. "But then even if it is true, how is that going to help us? Murphy would just claim that it was a shrewd business coup."

"Two can play at that game," Lew said. "We're going to shove that line through, Foley—and hold *Mister* Murphy to his contract."

As he rose and paid his check, he said casually, "By the way, what does this man Dan Murphy look like? I knew a man once by that name. I'm wondering if it's the same Murphy."

"Short, plump, shifty-eyed, and about forty." Foley gave the information on the way out. "Come here about four years ago. Heard he got his start over in the Guthrie field. Brought in a wildcatter on a shoe-string gamble."

"Funny thing," Foley mused. "Murphy's always puzzled me. Somehow he just don't seem to fit in with his background. He's shrewd, hard, and ruthless as hell. But to look at him—well, he looks like a crooked little weakling. I never could reconcile the two."

For just an instant, Lew's heart leaped when Foley mentioned that Dan Murphy had got his start in Guthrie on a wildcat venture almost five years before. But he remembered that Dan Murphy was not a short, plump man, nor did he have the appearance of a weakling.

Lew's shoulders sagged. He had run into another blind alley. This Murphy was not his man. Somewhere, the real Bob Murphy was sitting back, smiling, as he listened to stories of one Lew Mason—

the toughest, smartest trouble-shooter in the Cherokee Strip. Smart—*like hell!*

Smiling and thinking, That loud-mouthed, bragging young fool from Pennsylvania! I could tell you a few things about him. About how five years ago. . . ."

The old smouldering resentment flared up in Lew now. He knew that it was stupid to let a youthful mistake embitter him this way. But the thing had grown beyond reasoning long ago. It had become an obsession that kept him awake at nights. Inwardly, it had robbed him of his own confidence.

His success as a trouble-shooter—his rough, tough handling of situations was only an attempt to build up his own ego. To try and blot out the fact that he, Lew Mason, had once been taken like a fool by a total stranger. Had been made the laughing stock of all Pennsylvania. Hell, he was no man—merely a shell!

"Say, what's the matter with you?" Foley stared at him curiously. "You look sick. Are you all right?"

"Huh?" Lew jerked back to the present. He gave Foley a hard stare. "Of course, I'm all right," he said harshly. "Come on, let's get out to the end of the line."

At the livery stable, they mounted and rode down the narrow street. As they swung out across the prairie, Paul Foley shot a quick look at the hard-faced, square-jawed man riding beside him.

One thing was certain, he thought. If anyone could whip Paddy Ryan's teamsters into submission, this Lew Mason could. He was the most rugged trouble-shooter Paul Foley had ever run into. He acted as if he had a grudge against the entire world.

Lew rode in grim silence. Dan Murphy was not his man. Now he, Lew, was stuck with a job in which he no longer had any interest.

Chapter III

OILSTRIP HELLCAT!

TROUBLE was waiting for Lew Mason at the end of pipe line. Topping a rise a quarter-mile distant, Lew reined up at sight of the hundred or more men fighting up and down the black steel tube

that cut a line clear across the prairie.

"Hell!" Paul Foley swore beside him. "That's Paddy Ryan's teamsters! They're trying to tear up the line again."

Hitching his gunbelt forward, Lew said grimly, "Let's go!" and sent his roan plunging down the slope.

The Marin Oil men were taking a beating. Outnumbered two to one, they were doing their best to keep the teamsters from ripping at the eight-inch line. It was rough-and-tumble fighting—with here and there a gun barrel glinting in the sun.

There was no shooting, however. Evidently, neither side wanted to start a gun fight. The Marin men merely sought to break up the attack, the teamsters to rip out line.

While still a hundred yards away, Lew sent a shot screaming over their heads. Both teamsters and oil men broke off fighting to whirl and face the two thundering horsemen.

Spurring his way through the sullen group, Lew reined up at sight of Paddy Ryan. The Black Irishman's face was dirt-smeared. A bullwhip was gripped club-fashion in his hand. He bared white teeth in a challenging smile at Lew.

"So the trouble-shooter's doin' some shootin', huh?" Paddy's smile faded and his eyes got ugly. "Look, Mason, you better go back to town before you get hurt. We ain't standin' for no interference."

Slowly, Lew dismounted. Then with deliberate steps, he advanced on Ryan. "I told you, Paddy," he said, "that the next time we met, you wouldn't get off so easy. I'm going to break you, Paddy."

The Irishman grinned. He loved a good fight. "You're askin' for it, bucko," he snarled, and snaked the bullwhip out. "Well, here it is!"

Lew was waiting for it. Jumping aside, he grabbed the foot long popper as it whistled past, and yanked hard.

Thrown off balance, Paddy came plunging forward—trying desperately to keep his feet. Moving fast, Lew yanked the Irishman's head down, and brought his knee up viciously in Paddy's face.

Bone snapped loudly, and Paddy screamed out with pain. It was a brutal, savage move that knocked the Irishman

flat on his back. Lew drove in fast. But Ryan lashed out with heavy-booted feet that caught Lew full in the stomach and doubled him in agony.

Like a cat, Ryan rolled to his feet. He spat out a mouthful of blood and teeth and came charging in again—head down, feet driving, big fists swinging.

Stumbling back, Lew tried to cover up. Ryan smashed a savage right to the side of his head, another to his eye, and another just over the kidney. White-hot pain lanced through Lew and Ryan's face blurred before his eyes.

Somehow he stopped Paddy with a stinging blow to the Irishman's battered face. Paddy shook his head. He was breathing stertorously now. His nose lay folded over on his left cheek, his broken jaw hung at a grotesque angle. His breath came whistling through the gaps left by knocked-out teeth.

But none of his fighting spirit was gone. Paddy Ryan had guts—if nothing else. He grinned, lashed out with a booted foot for Lew's groin.

LEW twisted, grabbed Ryan's foot, and yanked up hard. Paddy went down with a crash on his back. Before he could roll away, Lew slashed in with driving boots. A blow to the head stunned the Irishman.

There was something terrible, deadly about Lew Mason now. Sweat ran down his face, one eye was completely closed. His mouth was a merciless slash across his face.

Oilmen and teamsters alike stood frozen now, making no attempt to interfere. This thing was between Mason and Ryan—no quarter asked, none given.

Deliberately, his face set in a granite mask, Lew came down hard with both knees on Paddy's chest. Paddy groaned as ribs snapped and gave way. Then he went suddenly limp.

Staggering to his feet, Lew turned on the sullen teamsters. He ran a cold, challenging eye over them. He jerked his thumb toward the half dozen wagons drawn up close by.

"Get going," he said harshly. "You're through tearing up pipe line. And, by God, the next time there'll be hot lead waiting for you. If that's what you want,

then why don't you come and get it!"

The teamsters hesitated. They looked half-heartedly toward Paddy Ryan. They had but little confidence in him now. The Irishman had been beaten at his own game—by a better man.

Paddy Ryan was on his hands and knees now. His head was down. Blood ran from his eyes, nose, and mouth. His breath came in shuddering gasps. He spat blood. Then with agonizing slowness, he staggered to his feet.

Turning, he stumbled toward the wagons. He braced himself against a tailgate and retched violently. After a moment, he dragged himself into the wagon bed. There he fell on his face and lay, unmoving.

That broke the tension. Sullenly, the teamsters climbed into their wagons and headed back toward town.

Wiping the blood from his face, Lew turned to Paul Foley. The big man's face was white and he looked sick. His eyes refused to meet Lew's. There was a moment's awkward silence. Lew saw the disgust on Foley's face, and his mouth tightened. He knew what Foley was thinking.

"Well, what the hell did you expect?" he said harshly. "That's part of a trouble-shooter's job. You think I like it any more than you do? It's not pleasant—but it's necessary."

Foley wiped the perspiration from his face. He was no weakling. But this had been rugged—plenty rugged. He knew that Lew was right. There was only one way to fight Paddy Ryan—with his own tricks.

"I know," he replied, and turned toward the pipe line crew. Singling out a short, thick-set man with a torn scalp, he asked, "Any of the boys bad hurt, Tom?"

The stocky man grinned. "A lot of cracked heads, but none that can't work after a couple hours rest."

Foley looked relieved. "Think you can go on laying pipe?"

"Hell," Tom Callahan retorted. "After seeing Paddy Ryan get the daylights beat out of him, I reckon nothing could stop us from laying this line now."

Suddenly remembering, Foley said, "By the way, Tom. This is Lew Mason, our trouble-shooter. He'll be around here a

good deal from now on. He'll work out of town though—sort of keeping an eye on both ends for trouble.

"Lew, meet Tom Callahan, assistant construction engineer."

Callahan shook hands. "Glad to know you, Mason. We sure been needing a trouble-shooter. And, believe me, you really shot the hell out of trouble just now. We were taking a beating."

Foley said, "Vance Lawler isn't with us anymore, Tom. I'm taking over from here on. Think you and I can do it?"

"Sure." Callahan then touched the section of torn scalp. "Never liked Lawler anyway. Somehow I never trusted him. Right now—well, we'll have to replace a couple of sections of pipe to begin with. Ryan managed to do a little damage."

TURNING to his battered crew, he said, "Take it easy for a couple of hours, boys. Then we'll start laying pipe again."

"Come on, Mason," he told Lew. "I'll show you how the line's stacking up."

Curious, Lew followed. Most of the lines he had seen in Pennsylvania had been underground. This one of Blaine Jackson's was just the opposite.

Massive timbers placed lengthwise provided a solid foundation. Resting on heavy two feet by six inch blocks, the pipe sections fitted snugly into halfmoon grooves. The line itself was approximately two and a half feet above the ground.

As each section was placed and secured, another length of pipe was threaded on with heavy pipe tongs—a half dozen men doing the job. A good fast crew could lay as much as a half mile of pipe a day.

"This must be a lot easier to lay than an underground line," Lew remarked. "No digging and refilling to do."

"Hell, it is!" Callahan exclaimed. "We've laid about fifty miles of line in four months. Better than half a mile a day! And it's easier to check an exposed line for leaks and corrosion, once pumping operations have started."

"What about your pumping stations?" Lew asked. "How many?"

"One about every fifteen miles," Paul Foley volunteered. "You see, Strip oil is not as heavy as that, say in Mexico. Down there, they have to set up a pump-

ing station every couple of miles sometimes.

"With our setup, we'll be able to handle about eighty thousand barrels a day to begin with. That won't handle it all, but it will keep things under control until we see how it works out."

Foley turned to Callahan. "How soon can we finish this string, Tom? Another two weeks?"

"We've got another three miles to go," Callahan thought a moment. "Say a half mile a day. Barring trouble—about a week."

"Looks like a short job for me," Lew observed dryly.

Big Paul Foley shook his head. "We'll need you around for a good while after this line is completed. Paddy Ryan will keep on trying to sabotage it even then."

As they walked back toward the crew, Lew asked, "How many men are you working here?"

"About fifty," Paul Foley said. "That's not counting about twenty of our own men we're also using to haul pipe out."

"Are they armed?"

Foley shook his head, frowning. "We've tried to avoid bloodshed, Mason. I'd rather not—"

"Have them start packing sixguns," Lew said grimly. "And issue orders to use them the next time those teamsters start trouble."

"Now wait, Mason," Foley protested. "That will only make—"

Lew whirled on him. "Look, Foley. Blaine Jackson hired me as a trouble-shooter. I've got to do things the way I see them. You take care of your end of things."

Foley shrugged. "Okay. They'll get the orders." Then: "Where are you going now?" he asked as Lew strode toward his horse.

"Back into town," Lew eased into the saddle. "I'd better report in to Jackson."

AS HE swung away and headed toward town, Foley looked at Tom Callahan and shook his head. "I'd hate to have him on my tail. He's a little too rugged for me."

"A trouble-shooter can't be easy, Paul," Callahan said. "Besides, I don't think Mason is nearly as tough as he acts. I

think he's trying to prove something to himself. Maybe somebody made a fool of him once." Callahan let it go at that.

"God help that man if Mason ever catches up with him!" Foley remarked, watching Lew's figure fade in the distance.

It was an hour of noon when Lew Mason reined up and dismounted before the Marin Oil office. The street was deserted, but the hitch-rack before the Gusher Saloon was jammed with horses. And further down, the Teamsters' Saloon was doing a rushing business.

The air was charged with an electric tension. Evidently Paddy Ryan and his teamsters had not been able to keep their defeat at end of pipe line a secret. Now things were beginning to hum. There was a quality of arrogant confidence at one end of town—and a sullen, vicious uncertainty at the other.

Halfway inside the Marin office, Lew paused as Vance Lawler came out of the Teamsters' Saloon and cut across the street to the Murphy Oil Company building.

A moment later, Paddy Ryan—his jaw bandaged now—came out and stood looking up and down the street. Then, holding his injured side, he followed Lawler into Murphy Oil.

Lew frowned. He could understand Lawler's action. Probably seeing Murphy about a job. But what connection was there between Lawler and Paddy Ryan? And between Paddy Ryan and Murphy Oil?

He was still pondering the matter when he walked into trouble for the second time in hours. A book sailed past his head and out the door as he entered Blaine Jackson's office. He ducked barely in time to avoid a heavy inkstand that hurtled close behind the book!

What the hell? he thought, and got his answer in the form of a woman's voice shouting, "Darn you anyway! Just who do you think you are, firing every man that even looks at me twice?"

"What are you trying to do—turn me into an old maid? Why, I'll teach you to interfere with my personal life! You—you—" There was a resounding crash from the inner office door as glass splintered.

Sticking his head cautiously around the door jamb, Lew stared at the chaos within. Then he broke into a wide grin.

Blaine Jackson was sprawled flat on his back behind his big desk, papers scattered in wild confusion about him. And standing over him, her dark eyes snapping furiously, her hair disarranged, was Sylvia Jackson.

From his prone position, Blaine Jackson caught sight of Lew. "For God sakes, Mason," he shouted. "Pull this crazy wench off, before she murders me!"

"I'll murder you all ri—" Sylvia broke off as her father's words drove home. She whirled and glared at Lew. "You keep out of this! Unless you want—"

Her voice trailed off, and she stood staring at Lew with obvious interest. A smile curved her rather wide mouth.

"Well, who are you?" And then with amusement, "You look just like Dad would have, if you hadn't come in!"

Scrambling to his feet, Blaine Jackson took one look at Lew—and then grinned. His own shattered dignity was forgotten. "Paddy Ryan sort of gave you a working over, too! I've already heard about what happened at end of pipe. And I got a glimpse of Paddy. My God. You must have hit him with everything from a pipe tong to the pipe itself."

LEW flushed under Sylvia's amused scrutiny. With one eye completely closed, he couldn't see her too well. But what he saw was enough to convince him that she was the most beautiful wench he'd ever seen.

Blaine Jackson coughed. "Lew, this is my daughter, Sylvia. A hell-cat if there ever was one. Sylvia—Lew Mason, my trouble-shooter. He's used to handling all kinds of people. Maybe he can even handle you."

Sylvia smiled. "I'm glad to know you, Lew Mason. Maybe I'll even like you when your face looks human again."

A painful grin split Lew's bruised lips. He was not without a sense of humor. And he knew that he *did* look like hell right now.

Suddenly serious, he turned back to Jackson. "I just saw Vance Lawler going into Murphy Oil's office. And then Paddy Ryan followed him in. They both

came out of the Teamster's Saloon. What do you make of it?"

"Lawler and Ryan, eh?" The little man frowned. "So Lawler's thrown in with the teamsters! What the hell's he up to now? Unless—" His shrewd eyes narrowed. "You suppose he's trying to get Murphy to meet the teamsters' demands?"

"Hell, if Murphy withdraws his support from the pipe line, the other companies will follow. That will ruin me."

He grabbed his hat and started for the door. His face was grim. "By God, I'll not stand by and see Lawler get away with this."

"Hold on, Jackson!" Lew grabbed him by the arm. "Going down there now with fire in your eyes won't help. If Murphy's going to give in to Ryan, he'll do it regardless of what you say. We'd just better wait—and see what happens. Then we can make our move."

Blaine Jackson reluctantly conceded the point. "But I'm telling you," he flared up again, "if that damn Lawler fouls this thing up for me, I'll go gunning for him sure as hell!" He shot a challenging look at his daughter.

Sylvia flushed. "I still think you're jumping to conclusions, Dad. Vance didn't like it when you fired him because of me. But he wouldn't stoop to a thing like that."

"I don't care what you think!" Blaine Jackson snapped. "A woman can't see beyond the end of her nose. You stay away from Lawler. Understand? I'm through fooling around with you, girlie."

Sylvia flushed and her chin came up. "All right," she retorted. "I'll stay away from Vance until this line is completed. I owe you that much. But when it's finished—"

"Why are you so hellbent on havin' anything to do with that fool!" the little man protested. "You're not in love with him."

A smile twisted Lew's mouth. "Maybe she just likes to be treated like a woman, Jackson, instead of a child. And maybe you drive her to things that really don't interest her."

Sylvia turned a startled, but nonetheless grateful glance upon Lew. It surprised her that this grim-faced trouble-shooter

had the understanding to grasp what her father couldn't.

"Tommy-rot!" Jackson exploded. "When I was young—"

"About Lawler's tie-in with Ryan," Lew said, changing the subject tactfully. "Somehow I don't think Lawler counts much in this game. There is something deeper going on here. Someone's trying to break you, Jackson. And we're bucking a damn clever man who will stop at nothing."

He shot the little man an inquiring look. "How long have you known Dan Murphy?"

Blaine Jackson snorted. "Long enough to know that he's just a front for someone else. Hell, I'm no fool. Dan Murphy hasn't got the sense to blow his own brains out. He's just a shifty-eyed little crook. Nothing else."

"What do you mean?" Lew's eyes lighted with interest. "He's president of Murphy Oil, isn't he?"

"Sure, he is," Jackson retorted. "*On the books*. But you can't tell me he's got sense enough to run Murphy Oil. Not the way it's being run now. Not a chance in a million.

"Murphy Oil's a damn big company. There's been some shrewd moves come from there. But Dan Murphy didn't make them. He's not smart enough. He's taking his orders from someone higher up. Someone who definitely don't want himself known!"

Lew's pulse leaped. It was a wild, crazy thought. Almost too wild. But suppose—

"I think I'll have a talk with this Murphy later in the day," he said. "Meanwhile, I'll sort of get the feel of the town a little."

Turning to Sylvia Jackson, he smiled. "Go easy on your Dad with those ink wells, Sylvia. He's a pretty important man around here. I'll see you later."

"Blast you, Mason!" Blaine Jackson yelled. "You ever mention one word about what you saw, and I'll cut your heart out."

Lew grinned. As he went outside, Sylvia Jackson's gay laughter followed him. It was hard for Lew to get the sound of that laughter out of his mind during the rest of the morning.

Chapter IV

THE MISSING GUN-BOSS

LU CHEE'S Restaurant was packed. It always was at noon. The little Chinese served the only decent food in town. And the pretty slant-eyed waitresses he'd brought from the Barbary Coast drew as many men as Lu Chee's food.

Suddenly the clatter of dishes and the drone of conversation died away. Men turned to stare curiously at the tall, broad-shouldered man just entering. Word had long since gotten around of the fight at end of pipe line. And they'd seen what had happened to Paddy Ryan. Now they were eager to get a look at Lew Mason, the man who'd licked Paddy.

"Hell, that trouble-shooter sure gave a lot more'n he took," a man whispered to his neighbor. "He damned near killed Paddy."

In an otherwise flat silence, Lew slipped into a seat and placed his order. Then he stared around him. This was an all oil-field crowd. There wasn't a teamster in the place. Evidently, Paddy Ryan had ordered them to avoid trouble—for the present, anyway.

Halfway through his meal, Lew spun as a small, dark-haired man barged inside, yelling excitedly, "Any of you fellas seen that trouble-shooter, Lew Mason?"

Rising, Lew hurried forward. He'd recognized the man as Ira Chase, one of Jackson's associates.

"Hello, Chase," he said. "What's up?"

Ira Chase was excited. Grabbing Lew by the arm, he propelled him outside. "The Old Man wants to see you. There's hell to pay. Dan Murphy's given the teamsters their freight rate increase.

"Him and the Old Man are down at the office arguing about it now. Murphy's withdrawing his support from the pipe line."

"The hell he is!" Lew lengthened his stride. He said nothing more as they hurried down the street to the Marin office. His mind was busy analyzing this new development.

He couldn't understand it. But then there were a lot of things he didn't understand. Why, for instance, hadn't Paddy Ryan fought the laying of the pipe line to

begin with? Why had he waited until it was practically completed before starting trouble and sabotage?

And why had Dan Murphy given in to the teamsters' demands just when the oil men were on the verge of wiping them out? Murphy knew that his withdrawal would likely shatter the rest of the operators' faith in the line. And worse—would probably cause a wholesale withdrawal of piping contracts that would ruin Blaine Jackson.

Just what was Murphy's game? To wipe out Marin Oil, his strongest rival? And then to absorb the smaller companies one at a time?

That would have sounded logical, Lew thought—cutting across the street. *Except* that both Paul Foley and Blaine Jackson had branded Murphy as the type who somehow just didn't fit in with such a scheme.

Was Blaine Jackson right in thinking that Murphy was only a figurehead for a shrewd, powerful brain in the background? And if so, *who was that man, and why didn't he want to be known?*

A half-eager expectancy gripped Lew as he strode into the Marin office. Had this been another wild goose chase for him, after all? Or had he perhaps at last found—

Blaine Jackson's voice—harsh and angry—blasted out of the inner office now. "What the hell are you trying to do, Murphy, break me? Don't you know your withdrawal is going to start a stampede among the other companies? Dammit, your meeting those teamsters' terms just when the line is almost finished don't smell right to me!"

Jackson, standing behind his big desk, caught sight of Lew and Ira Chase through the door. "Come on in, Mason," he ordered. "Looks like we've got our backs to the wall."

AS LEW entered, his eyes ranged over the short, pot-bellied man sitting near Jackson's desk. Pale, shifty eyes stared back at him a bare instant and then switched away.

Dan Murphy looked anything but the shrewd, ruthless oil company president he was reputed to be, Lew thought. Sandy hair—thinned to the point of baldness on

top, a dull Slavic face that definitely didn't fit the name Murphy, heavy-jowled, and a weak, flabby mouth. That was the president of Murphy Oil.

And yet Lew had caught a suggestion of animal-like craftiness in those shiny eyes. A man like this, he thought, was capable of anything so long as it offered no risk to himself. But one thing was certain—*Dan Murphy didn't have the brains to concoct this game going on now.*

Pausing before the desk, Lew said, "What's this crazy talk about Murphy here giving in to the teamsters?"

Blaine Jackson shot an angry look at the heavy-set man. "Murphy's just sold me out to Ryan. He claims Lawler's convinced him the pipe line is impractical. He don't think the teamsters will ever let that last mile of pipe go through. Hell, maybe you can talk some sense into him. I can't."

"So Lawler and Ryan *did* get together!" Lew turned cold, unfriendly eyes upon Murphy. "Look, Murphy," he said harshly. "Maybe you're an oil company president, but you're not showing the sense of one!"

"You had faith enough in this pipe line to sign a pumping contract with Jackson here. You were convinced that it was practical then—or you'd never have done that. What's got into you?"

"Don't tell me you're fool enough to listen to Lawler. You know why he's giving you that talk. Jackson here fired him, and now he's trying to get revenge."

Dan Murphy shifted uneasily in his chair. "Look, fella—I don't *have* to listen to Lawler. I've got sense enough to know when a thing won't work. If you do complete this line, what happens? Paddy Ryan's teamsters will keep tearing it out after you start pumping. Ryan told me so himself.

"And, hell, you can't patrol fifty or sixty miles of pipe line twenty-four hours a day. Don't try and make me believe that! Who in hell do you think you're talking to anyway?"

"That's just what *I'd* like to know!" Reaching out, Lew yanked Murphy savagely to his feet. Lew's face was granite-hard. "Come on, damn you. Just who *am* I talking to?"

"Your name may be Murphy. You may

be president of Murphy Oil. I don't know about that part. But who really controls the company? Who's the brains behind this scheme to ruin Blaine Jackson? Come on, talk, damn you! *What's his name?*"

Murphy struggled to break free. "You're crazy, Mason! I take orders from no one. And I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're a damned liar!" Lew's voice was dangerously soft. "Some one higher up gave you those orders to withdraw your support to Jackson. Just as they told you to sign that contract to begin with, so Jackson would begin construction. Then with his money sunk in the line, they knew that it would break him to lose those pumping contracts."

He rocked Murphy's head from side to side with a series of open-handed slaps. "Now," he yanked Murphy in close. "*What's the name of the man who gives you orders? Isn't his name Murphy, too—maybe Bob Murphy?*"

THE pupils of Murphy's eyes dilated. He twisted his head and cried, "Haul him off me, Blaine! I don't know what he's talking about! I own Murphy Oil—"

Grimly, Lew smashed him back against the desk with a hard fist. "You saw what happened to Paddy Ryan, didn't you? I won't be as easy with you, Murphy."

Men like Dan Murphy were strange characters. They were normally cowards, but when they were pushed too far, they developed a stubborn wilfulness alien to their nature.

Murphy looked at Lew now, and his weak mouth hardened. That stubborn quality crept into his eyes. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Mason," he said. "And getting tough with me won't make me lie. I'm owner and president of Murphy Oil, and that's that."

Years of contact with such men as this told Lew that he was beaten. He could pound Dan Murphy into a pulp now, and get nothing but that same answer.

"Okay, Murphy," he said harshly. "If that's the way you want it. But get this straight. That pipe line's going through, *and* it's going to operate. You, and whoever's behind you, are going to find yourself out on a nice long limb."

"The teamsters are finished. Hauling

your oil alone won't keep them in business. And after this, Blaine Jackson here will see you in hell before he'll even pump a barrel of your oil!"

Heavy face mottled with anger, Murphy wheeled on Jackson. "Damn you, Blaine," he snarled. "I didn't come here to be mauled around and threatened. Who's running Marin Oil, you or this damned trouble-shooter?"

Blaine Jackson leaned back in his chair and grinned. He'd gotten such a kick out of seeing the pompous Murphy shoved around that he forgot to worry about losing the pumping contract.

"You heard the man," he retorted. "And he took the words right out of my mouth."

Dan Murphy's heavy jowls quivered. He tried to say something, failed—and stormed furiously out of the office. The outer door banged behind him.

A worried look crept into Blaine Jackson's eyes. He was no longer smiling. "That was big talk we just made, Lew," he said. "But it don't alter the fact that Murphy's got us across a barrel."

He turned to Ira Chase, who had stood silent during the short, violent scene. "If we give in to those teamsters, we're finished, Ira. We've sunk too much in that line. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Hell, Mason here says it can go through!" Ira Chase's voice matched the intensity of his black eyes. "You'll have to talk to Foley and Stoddard first—but Mason's word is good enough for me."

"Foley and Stoddard will fall in line," Jackson predicted. Then: "All right, Mason—Foley will carry through with his end of things. And I'll expect you to keep Ryan's teamsters off his tail."

"Meanwhile, I'll try and keep the rest of the companies in line until we can start pumping and prove that it's practical. If I can't—"

He left the thought unsaid, but Lew knew what he meant. If those other companies followed Murphy's lead and withdrew, Marin Oil was ruined—wiped out. And Blaine Jackson along with it.

DURING the following week, Paul Foley drove his crews relentlessly. Work went on sixteen hours a day. And

the pipe line stretched out, a section at a time, across the prairie toward Marlow.

Lew Mason was everywhere—in town, gauging the temper of the desperate teamsters, in the saddle, patrolling the pipe line, in town, conferring with Blaine Jackson.

Somehow Jackson had managed to talk the other operators into staying with him until the line was completed. If pumping operations were successful, they'd stay. Otherwise, they, too, would withdraw.

The teamsters had made no further move since their raid which had ended so disastrously for Paddy Ryan. Nor had Lew seen the Black Irishman. Evidently, Paddy had holed up—recovering from the beating he had taken. But Lew knew Paddy too well to think that he had given up. Paddy had something up his sleeve—and was waiting for the right time to strike.

Vance Lawler had gone to work for Dan Murphy, doing what Lew didn't know. Once he saw Lawler stop Sylvia Jackson on the street. And it gave him a school-boy elation to see Lawler get a cool brush-off. He'd been doing a lot of thinking about Sylvia himself lately.

As for Dan Murphy—Lew was frankly baffled. Although he was convinced that Murphy was merely a figurehead for someone higher up, he couldn't prove it. He'd questioned practically every oilman in town, and had come up with a blank each time.

If there was someone behind Murphy, no one knew who he was. True, a steady stream of men came and went from Murphy's office. But they were always well-known operators or Murphy's own over-all-clad drillers.

Lew was both puzzled and infuriated by his failure. He couldn't figure out just how Murphy was getting his orders. Why would a man want to keep his association with Murphy Oil a secret? This was a rugged game with no holds barred. Men expected ruthlessness from their competitors.

Nothing was to be gained by secretiveness. Yet someone had evidently been doing it for years. Why? Was that man afraid of something, or someone? The thought sent the blood coursing through his veins. He remembered the shock in

Dan Murphy's eyes that day in Jackson's office when he'd mentioned the name *Bob Murphy*.

Somehow, he had the feeling that a trail, cold for five years, was growing warm.

As for the rest—there was no doubt that the teamsters' strike had been genuine and spontaneous. It was simply that the brain behind Murphy Oil had been quick to turn the situation to his advantage. He'd encouraged the laying of the pipe line by having Murphy sign a pumping contract with Jackson. And the other companies had followed Murphy's lead.

With this backing, Blaine Jackson had sunk his fortune into the construction of the line. In view of the deteriorating situation due to the teamsters' strike, this had seemed logical enough.

But to Lew, there were too many angles that didn't fit. For instance, why had Paddy Ryan held off until construction was almost finished before striking back? Why hadn't he ripped out the lines from the very beginning as he had in Guthrie the year before? It didn't fit in with Paddy's nature.

Then there was Vance Lawler, who'd supposedly convinced Murphy that the pipe line was doomed to failure. But had he? Murphy was an oil man. He'd have investigated the line's practical side before signing that contract.

Were Lawler and Paddy Ryan—as well as Murphy—a part of a clever scheme to break Blaine Jackson? And then to take over the smaller companies, one at a time?

These questions plagued Lew, and they went unanswered.

Meanwhile, he sensed that things were rapidly building up to a climax. Things were too quiet. A hushed, breathless expectancy had fallen over the entire Cherokee Strip.

But Lew knew that, at any moment, the powder keg of smouldering hates, greed, and ambition was likely to blow sky-high.

ON SATURDAY—two days ahead of schedule—Paul Foley drove the line into Marlow. Only the laying of the last fifty-foot section of pipe remained to link the field's far-flung wells with the railway shipping point.

Every operator in the Strip turned out

to see this final ceremony. Drillers, tool pushers, roustabouts, too—all laid off for months due to the teamster trouble—gathered, grim-faced, at end of pipe. For upon the success of the line depended their jobs, as well as the fate of the entire field.

Blaine Jackson was there with his daughter Sylvia—and his associates. The little man paced nervously back and forth, wiping his perspiring face frequently with a soiled handkerchief. Only he and Lew Mason—and the unknown brain behind all this—knew what was really at stake here.

Dan Murphy was present, standing alone to one side. His eyes shifted continuously. His heavy jowls quivered with some inner emotion. A malicious smile of expectancy curled his flabby lips. He did not appear to be concerned about the outcome.

Lew Mason, moving quietly through the crowd, noted that smile, and frowned. Murphy had no reason to be pleased with completion of the line. Something was wrong. Sensitive to the mood of the crowd, Lew felt the tension mounting here now.

Paddy Ryan's teamsters—two hundred strong—stood apart, gripping their bullwhips and staring sullenly at the oil men. They all packed sixguns in addition to those deadly whips.

Searching their ranks, Lew stiffened—and the tension caught at him, too. *Paddy Ryan was not with his men*. And at a time when they desperately needed his leadership.

Something was wrong.

Lew knew it definitely when he discovered that Vance Lawler was also missing. He realized that the lid was about ready to blow off things. And he thought he knew why, where, and how.

Casualty, he made his way toward Blaine Jackson, who stood with his daughter, Sylvia, and his associates. Ira Chase, excitable as ever, was rattling away to Ray Stoddard, who remained quiet and calm under the strain.

Paul Foley was patiently awaiting orders to lower that last fifty-foot section in place. Pipe tongs ready, a half dozen men stood by to secure it.

"Yeah?" Blaine Jackson started as Lew

came close to him and touched his arm. "Better pass the word around to expect trouble," Lew said. "*Shooting* trouble. Paddy Ryan and Vance Lawler are missing. Something's up. I'll try and stop it if I can."

As he moved away, Sylvia Jackson grasped his arm. "Be careful, Lew," she whispered breathlessly. "You know, the more I see of that face of yours, the more I like it."

Later, Lew was to realize what she had meant by that remark. But right now, his mind was too busy with the trouble ahead.

"Don't worry," he told Sylvia, and headed toward the Marin Oil office. There he mounted his roan and followed the pipe line out of town at a hard, jarring run.

Behind him, oil men hitched at their gun belts as word circulated to expect trouble. The teamsters, noting the action, gripped their bull-whips a little tighter. There wasn't a one of them who couldn't pop a gun out of a man's hand at twenty feet.

The crowd sensed trouble. Both sides shifted uneasily. No one knew just when and where the break would come. But they all knew it was coming.

Blaine Jackson wet his lips. Then he shouted, "All right, Paul—settle that casing!"

Like the long finger of Progress, the fifty-foot section dropped into place and the men with the pipe tongs stepped forward.

Chapter V

KING OF A BLACK GOLD EMPIRE

RIDING hell-bent-for-leather, Lew Mason followed the pipe line across the prairie. He cursed himself for not having realized that the brains behind Murphy Oil would use this psychological moment to strike.

With the whole Strip gathered to celebrate completion of the line, a destructive move now would serve to show that the line could never operate successfully. Such a play would shatter the operators' faith in it. They'd withdrawn their pumping contracts, and Blaine Jackson would be wiped out.

Brush popped Lew's overall-clad legs now. Once his horse stumbled and al-

most went down. He took a rising slope at a bone-jarring run, and then brought the roan back on its haunches as he topped the crest.

Below him—and less than a hundred yards away—three men were bent over the pipe line. Lew didn't have to see those long sticks of dynamite to know what was happening. He'd sensed it all along. Blowing up a few sections of pipe now would show the operators how easily it could be repeated—time and again—*with crude running through the line.*

There was no time for caution. Already one of the men was stringing out a long fuse. They were giving themselves plenty of leeway to get clear of flying metal.

Drawing his gun, Lew dug spurs into the roan and charged down the slope.

Surprise held the trio frozen until he had covered half the distance. Lew recognized Paddy Ryan's flaming red hair and Vance Lawler's tall, slim figure. But the third man—big, broad-shouldered—was new. Yet there was something to the set of the third man that sent the blood pounding through Lew's veins. Five years was a long time, but—

Paddy Ryan yelled and grabbed for his gun. The big stranger raced for his horse a few feet away. A match flared in Vance Lawler's hand as he hurriedly bent over the dynamite fuse.

It was a long shot, and a hard one from a racing horse. But Lew knew what would happen at end of pipe if Lawler set off that dynamite now. Lew fired, and Vance Lawler pitched forward, the life in him dying out with the match in his outstretched hand.

Paddy Ryan stood spraddle-legged, hunched, the .45 in his hand blazing away as Lew charged him.

A bullet screamed past Lew's head, another burned across his thigh. His hat went flying from his head. Paddy Ryan was throwing lead, fast. Lew held his fire until he couldn't miss. Then he squeezed the trigger.

Dust spurted from Paddy's overalls just above the heart. Paddy staggered. Still firing, he dropped to his knees—and finally forward on his face, the sixgun clutched in his big hand.

Paddy Ryan died as he had lived, fight-

ing. But his battles had always been on the wrong side—and for the wrong things. Now he had collected his wages in violent death.

Thankful that his horse had not been hit, Lew whirled after the fleeing stranger. He was interested in that big man—damned interested. Reloading his sixgun on the run, he raced in hot pursuit. But the other man had a quarter-mile lead and was riding a fast horse. Within minutes, Lew had lost sight of him. Yet he knew where the big man was heading.

Lew's face was set and grim as he swung toward town. There was a showdown waiting for him there, and he only hoped that it was the right one. Five years was a long time to wait.

TROUBLE was beginning to break out between the oilmen and the teamsters when Lew reined up at the shipping point. The teamsters—either not aware of Paddy Ryan's plans or else impatient because they had not gone off—were in an ugly mood.

A dozen fist fights were already going on, and threats were being hurled at the oilmen. So far, however, neither side had used their guns. The teamsters—more at home with a whip than a .45—were reluctant to start a shooting war without Paddy Ryan's leadership. But it would take only one flash of a sixgun in the sunlight to bring on a bloody massacre.

Spurring through the teamsters' close-packed ranks, Lew stood up in his stirrups and shouted, "Listen, you fools. Paddy Ryan's dead. You start trouble now without a leader—and you're finished. You wouldn't have a chance!"

An angry roar rose from the teamsters. It was obvious that they didn't know whether to believe Lew or not. They began to crowd around him, cursing. But the sixgun in Lew's hand brought them up short.

"You teamsters think Paddy was trying to help you," he snapped. "The hell he was. Paddy Ryan was looking after himself. Why didn't he let you rip this line out when it was first being laid? I'll tell you why—because he'd sold you out to Murphy Oil and whoever's really running it!"

"I just caught Paddy and Vance Law-

ler trying to dynamite the line about a mile all the way out of town. That was to make the operators lose faith in the line and break their pumping contracts with Blaine Jackson.

"And if Jackson had lost those contracts, he'd have been ruined. Pumping his own oil wouldn't cover the cost of operation, much less pay off the original investment. Someone back of Murphy Oil is trying to break Blaine Jackson—and then gradually take over the little companies."

The oilmen broke into an angry roar. This news of Paddy Ryan's treachery and of Murphy Oil's tie-in with the teamsters threatened to set off their hair-trigger tempers at any instant.

"Shut up!" Lew shouted. "You teamsters. You thought that if you broke Marin Oil, you'd get your freight increase, didn't you? The hell you would! Whoever's behind Murphy planned to take over the pipe line, wipe you teamsters out, and then charge the operators an exorbitant rate to pump their oil to the shipping point.

"When the operators couldn't meet that rate, he'd have squeezed them into a forced sale. You've been played for fools, just as I was once!"

Both oilmen and teamsters were silent now. The things Lew was saying had shocked them into momentary speechlessness. But their anger toward Murphy Oil was a growing white flame of hate that kept mounting.

Sensing it, Lew was quick to take advantage. "Five years ago, in Pennsylvania, a man named Bob Murphy robbed me of money I'd sweated blood to save up and build a wildcatter. He made me the laughingstock of Oiltown. I never forgot.

"When he skipped out and came here to the Strip, I followed. He must have found out. Anyway, I lost track of him. But I knew he was somewhere in the Strip—either using another name or operating under cover. *I know now it was under cover.*"

THE teamsters shifted uneasily. They were uncertain of just what to do. The news of Paddy's death, his betrayal of them, and of this new threat to their existence—had destroyed their unity.

Lew searched the crowd for Dan Murphy. He spotted Murphy slipping furtively down the street toward the Murphy Oil office. Lew made no move to stop the short man. This was what he wanted.

He faced the crowd once more. "Rumor has it that Dan Murphy got his start on a wildcat venture in Guthrie five years ago," he said. "Maybe he did; maybe he didn't.

"Yet one thing is certain—Dan Murphy's not smart enough to have built up one of the biggest oil companies here in the Strip. Nor is he clever enough to have worked out this scheme to destroy Blaine Jackson.

"But there was a *third* man with Paddy Ryan and Vance Lawler on that dynamiting attempt. *And that man does have the brains.* He got away and rode back to town. He's in the Murphy Oil office right now—with Dan Murphy.

"Only Murphy's name is not really Murphy. I don't know what it is—and I don't care. Because whoever he is, he's nothing but a figurehead. Bob Murphy is the real president of Murphy Oil!"

An incredulous silence slapped down over oilman and teamster alike. No one but Blaine Jackson and Paul Foley had ever suspected that Dan Murphy was only a stooge.

As he swung his horse away, Lew shot the teamsters a parting warning. "If you start trouble, a good many of you will end up dead. And even if you do win, where will it get you? Hell, Murphy would finish you off in short order.

"Use your heads. You're not wiped out. Alter those tank wagons to freighters and you'll have all the work you can handle hauling casing, tools, and equipment. But don't try to hold back Progress."

As he headed toward the Murphy Oil building, Blaine Jackson called after him. "Where are you going now?"

"After Bob Murphy!" Lew retorted grimly, and left the crowd behind.

There was no sign of life about Murphy Oil as Lew catfooted across the porch. Nor could he hear any sound of movement within.

Grimly, he loosened his .45 in its holster and opened the door. For an instant, he hesitated—then slipped inside. The outer office was cool and dim. The kerosene

lamp overhead was darkened. It was quiet here, very quiet.

But from behind a frosted door marked *Dan Murphy, Pres.* came the sound of angry voices. Lew stiffened, listening, as he heard Dan Murphy shout, "Don't blame it on me. You wanted to handle that dynamiting job yourself.

"If you'd let Ryan and Lawler take care of it alone, nothing could have been pinned on us. But now the cat's out of the bag. That damned Mason knows who you are. We've got to get out of here. I—"

"Shut up, Johannsac!" a man's voice snarled. "And stop crying over spilt milk. There's twenty thousand dollars in this safe. That's enough to get started somewhere else."

Johannsac. Lew drew in his breath. So that was the phony Murphy's real name. Those Slavic features. Yes, he might have known.

"Maybe for one," Johannsac protested.

"But where do I come in?"

"Come in?" The other man's voice was soft, deadly. "You don't Johannsac. *This is where you go out.*"

"For God's sake—put that gun away!" Johannsac's voice rose on a hysterical note. "You wouldn't—"

A .45 roared dully in the inner office and Johannsac's voice broke off sharply. For perhaps thirty seconds after that, there was a deepening silence. Then the sound of movement once more.

Quietly, Lew opened the door and stepped inside.

Crouched before an open safe—a metal cash box on the floor beside him—the big man was stuffing thick sheafs of greenbacks into a satchel.

In a chair behind the massive desk, Dan Murphy—Johannsac, his real name was—slumped forward, his head resting on the polished surface. There was a small, neat hole in his temple.

Something—perhaps the sudden rush of air through the open door—froze the big man in his crouching position.

Lew said softly, "I'll take two thousand dollars of that money, plus interest for five years, *Bob Murphy!*"

A ripple ran across the big man's powerful shoulder muscles. Slowly, keeping his hand well away from his gun, he rose.

Bob Murphy had changed but little with the years. Drunk as he had been the night in Oiltown, Lew would have remembered Murphy anywhere. Murphy's face still wore that genial, hail-fellow-well-met look. Save for the eyes—unmasked now. Shrewd, cold, ruthless—they betrayed the man's inner nature.

Murphy smiled grimly. "So you finally caught up with me, Mason." He didn't sound surprised. "But then I've known you would ever since I found out you'd followed me to Guthrie five years ago. I realized then I'd misjudged you back there in Oiltown."

"You were a little late finding that out, Murphy," Lew said. "I'd have followed you to hell and back until I caught up with you."

"I know." Murphy shrugged. "That's why I cleared out after making that strike in Guthrie. Why I came here and set that fool, Johannsac, up as dummy president of Murphy Oil. I figured that would throw you off."

"Don't get ideas, Mason. I'm not afraid of you, I never was. But I knew it would ruin me if people ever found out about what happened back there in Oiltown."

"A thief's a thief anywhere, eh, Murphy?" Lew's smile was thin. "Still, I give you credit for playing a smart game here. But I could never figure out how you gave Johannsac his orders without being suspected."

"Simple," Murphy said. "I posed as one of his drillers when I came here to the office. It was easy. As a matter of fact, the whole thing was simple."

"When the teamsters struck, I tricked Blaine Jackson into building that pipe line. I had Johannsac sign a pumping contract with Jackson to clinch it. Then I bought out Paddy Ryan and Lawler. I had Paddy hold off attacks until the line was almost finished. Lawler slowed down construction. By then, Jackson had sunk too much money in it to quit."

"When I had Johannsac withdraw support from the line, I thought the rest of the operators would follow suit. But Jackson wielded more influence over them than I figured. He managed to keep them in line until construction was finished. That's the reason I had to try and panic them by dynamiting the line."

Little pin points of flame began building up in his icy eyes. "Damn you, Mason, if it hadn't been for you, I'd have broken Jackson. And with Marin Oil out of the way, it would have been easy to have taken over the other little companies. By God, maybe I can still do it."

"Don't count on those teamsters, Murphy." There was a convincing note in Lew's voice. "Without Paddy Ryan, they're not worth a damn. Besides, they've been offered a chance to freight supplies and equipment instead of crude oil from here on. The chances are they'll take it."

"But it won't make any difference to you one way or the other. I'm going to kill you, Murphy."

MURPHY sneered. "You can't forget that I made a fool out of you five years ago, can you, Mason? That's what's been eating you—not the loss of that two thousand dollars."

"Well, you're not going to kill me, Mason. I've got twenty thousand dollars in this bag to make a new start somewhere else. And the fastest horse in the country out back to clear out on. But before I go—" His hand blurred hipward, and came up with a blazing sixgun.

It was a fast move that caught Lew half off-guard. A slug smashed the old fashioned "turnip" watch in his bib pocket, knocking him back against the desk. Only that watch had saved him. As he twisted aside, another bullet burned across his hip. The third missed and thudded into Johannsac's body behind him.

Then his own gun was out and spewing lead. Murphy was too big to miss. But he was hard to down. Lew's first slug—a center shot through the body—drove Murphy back a step. But it didn't stop him. Murphy kept firing as lead continued to thud into his massive, thick-set body. A wild shot knocked Lew's left leg from under him, and Lew went down hard.

Bob Murphy grinned, and blood gushed from his mouth to stain his overall bib. Then his big head snapped back as Lew drove a bullet between his eyes. The force of the heavy slug rocked him back on his heels. For a long second he teetered there. Then he plunged forward on his face.

Smoke curled lazily from the long barrel

(Continued on page 128)

Boothill Ante



The slug slammed into the lamp and coal oil spurted all over the table.

To win back a stolen fortune from the tinhorn gambler, Matt Harte must masquerade as the kind of selfish, greedy, gold-mad hombre he'd hated, despised—and only itched to line his sights on!

THE SATURDAY stage rolled into Hung Crick in a billow of dust. Old Neill, the driver, slammed the brakes on with a grating, crunching sound, and jerked his six-mule team to a halt.

"Somebody git the sheriff!" he yelled.

Half the population of Hung Crick had been waiting for the stage anyway. As

By
**ROBERT
L.**

TRIMNELL

the old driver yelled for the sheriff, a dozen men spilled out of the batwings of the Hung Crick Saloon and a bunch swarmed off the porch of the hotel. They milled around the stage, and a couple helped old Neill hand a blanket-covered figure down to the street.

"It's Bill Cherney," someone said.

"Drygulched, 'bout ten mile up the road," the driver grumbled.

The confusion was such that nobody noticed a tall, lean man climbing out of the stage. He strode easily up to the porch of the hotel and turned to look down at the crowd. He set his carpetbag down, took a cigar out from under his coat and slipped it into a wide, generous mouth. He was dressed in black—a long frock coat, wide black hat and black shoestring tie. Only his shirt and face were white.

It was a lean face, with strong bones. The pallor indicated one of two things—jail or card games. From the expensive cut of his clothes, the latter was the more likely. He stood surveying the crowd with gray, piercing eyes. At last he caught the eye of a stocky cowhand. The cowhand dove through the crowd, leaped up on the porch.

"Matt! Matt Harte!" the stocky man yelled, and wrung the tall one's white hand.

"Hello, Jake. How's M Bar J comin' along?"

"Fine. I got her all back in shape, mortgage cleared and all that stuff. That is, Matt—"

MATT HARTE laughed, deep and pleasantly. "Don't get embarrassed now, Jake. Sure, I gambled off my share of the ranch and maybe a little of yours. But I've got money. I'll pay back what I owe yuh." He struck a match and held it to the end of his cigar. As the sweet smoke billowed out his face clouded.

"Bill Cherney was shot in the back, Jake. Funny thing, we found him 'bout ten miles up the road, but he wasn't shot there. Bled a lot, but none where he was layin'." Matt leaned against a porch post and breathed out a fine stream of blue smoke. "Why you reckon it was, Jake? Old codger was worth a lot of cattle, but—"

"He won near two thousand dollars at th' saloon last night." Jake was watching

a bunch of men carrying old Bill Cherney over to the undertaker's. Then Jake turned around quickly, his eyebrows crinkled into a worried frown. "Matt, are yuh tyin' up with me again?"

The tall man laughed. "I gambled away my share of M Bar J, like I said, Jake. No, I came back to Hung Crick to even up a score. And pick up a little interest on the investment," he added thoughtfully.

"Gates Evans?"

Matt nodded. He bit down on his cigar, and one hand pulled back the frock coat. His fingers drummed a tattoo on the handle of a big Colt holstered high on his hip.

"You aren't figgerin' on gunnin' him, Matt?"

"No. But I'm goin' to use every short deal and second card trick to beat Gates Evans." His eyes were smoldering. "I've ridden the river boats, Jake. I've played the boomtowns. Fer three years I've handled a lot of cards, Jake. I'm goin' to bust the Hung Crick Saloon wide open to-night."

Jake pulled makings from his pocket and began building a smoke. "Yuh can come back to M Bar J, Matt. I'd be proud to have yuh."

Matt's jaw stuck out. "I got to bust Evans."

Jake licked his cigarette closed, lit it and straightened his dusty, battered range hat. "See yuh later, Matt." He stepped down from the porch and untied his buckskin from the hitch rail. Slowly he climbed into the saddle. He didn't look at Matt again. Face averted, he trotted his pony down the street.

Matt bit savagely on his cigar. For a moment he thought of grabbing a horse and riding after his old-time partner. He pictured the tails of his long black coat flapping in the wind and he grinned. But he still had a yearning to get out on the range, to feel the spooky dynamite of a half-broken mustang under him. Angrily he threw the cigar away and strode down off the porch, over to the saloon, and through the swinging doors.

The stage coach crowd had begun to fill the place up, some opening mail and parcels, others arguing about Bill Cherney's death. Matt eased through the crowd and up to the bar. He ordered a rye and leaned against the bar, searching the noisy mob.

A minute later his eyes caught another set of eyes—black and sharp, under fine dark brows. Gates Evans even wore the same type clothes, black hat and long coat. The uniform of the profession, Matt reflected. Then Evans was elbowing through the crowd up to Matt's side.

He signaled for a drink, turned and showed a thin-lipped grin. "Three years, eh Harte?"

Matt picked up his drink and stared over the rim of the shot glass at the Hung Crick's proprietor. He poured it down, still staring into Evans' black eyes—the only man in Hung Crick who was his own height, maybe even a little broader. And with the same white professional pallor.

"I'd like to bash your face in, Evans."

The black eyes narrowed together. Then Gates Evans smiled with a down twist at the corners of his lips. He took his drink and downed it.

"That what yuh came back to Hung Crick for?" he growled.

MATT felt a bunching in his shoulders. One ached. The one that had been torn by a slug from Gates Evans' der-ringer one night three years before. The scene came back into Matt's mind.

The thin, down-hooked smile of Gates Evans across the table from him, and the king of hearts he had glimpsed on the bottom of the deck. Then the same card rounding out Evans' full house. He hadn't seen one white hand beneath the table when he clawed for his sixgun. But he had felt the slug crashing into him.

He remembered the shame he had felt when he was dumped out in the street. The remainder of his share of M Bar J was on that hand. Matt had ridden out of town burning with hate and shame. Things would not be the same until he had taken every cent Gates Evans had. It could only be done by a man who knew cards as well as Matt had known the sun-fishing of an unbroken bronc, the jerk of a lassoed dogie, the sweet smell of the sage in the fall. Matt stood his apprenticeship in the lamplight and the smoke of the gambler's world. Now he was ready.

"I came back to play cards with you, Gates." Matt's voice was flat, stripped of emotion.

Gates Evans showed his thin, hooked

smile again. "Table stakes, maybe?"

"With every dollar I've got on the table."

Evans shook his head and the hooks on his smile etched deeper. "Thought you learned your lesson, cowboy." He shrugged. "Eight o'clock." Then he elbowed away through the crowd.

Matt paid for his drink and left the Hung Crick Saloon. Back on the hotel porch he found it was not yet time for supper. Thoughtfully, he pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it.

"Better get a drink, Bill." The voice was behind him. Matt turned. A tall young man with blue eyes and blond hair stood there, biting his lip. Another cow-hand stood by him, trying to get him to go over to the saloon.

"Young Bill Cherney!" Matt said. Then he remembered. "Awful sorry, Bill. I thought a lot of your dad too."

The younger Cherney nodded. "Yuh came in on the stage that brought dad's body, Matt?"

"I helped Old Neill load him on."

Cherney took makings out of his pocket and tried to make a cigarette with shaking fingers. "I'm offerin' a twenty-five hundred reward fer the killer," he said. "Sheriff just posted it." Cherney's voice was brittle, ground out through clenched teeth. He managed to lick the cigarette closed. "Not that a reward'll do much good. They say the Hung Crick was jam-full last night, and everybody knew Dad come out big winner. And everybody knew which way he'd take home."

Matt stared out at the street. Hung Crick had roughened up a bit since he was gone, it seemed. He saw two men hurrying into the saloon. One was squatty and dark, the other skinny, hawk-nosed. Both wore sixguns low on their hips.

"When did that breed start comin' in?"

Young Cherney lit his cigarette. "That's Injun Pete and Skinny Kanse. Seem mighty close to Gates Evans. Gun-nies, yuh might say. Been here three, four months now." His eyes went cold blue as he fixed them on Matt. "But outside of Evans, we ain't seen many of your kind."

Matt stared back. He looked at Cherney's range-worn levis, battered hat and scarred boots. Somehow he had always

figured himself as that sort of hombre. Then he realized how they saw him. A sharp, expensively dressed gambler with white face and soft hands. A man who sat in a chair and fleeced honest cowmen out of their pay, backing it up with a derringer. Not that Matt carried one. He wore his short gun in an open holster, hidden only when his coat hung forward.

Matt said, "Yuh forgettin' the round-ups we've ridden together, Cherney?"

"No. That's why I'm warnin' yuh," he rasped. "There's goin' to be trouble fer your kind in Hung Crick." He turned abruptly, jumped off the porch. With the small cowhand following he went over to the saloon.

Matt shook his head. His welcome home hadn't quite come off the way he had planned. Slowly he walked in to the dining room, head lowered in thought.

AT EIGHT Matt pushed into the Hung Crick Saloon. It was jammed full, as always on Saturday night. He went over to the bar and got a drink, then moved to the back of the place to Gates Evans' office. He rapped sharply on the closed door.

A hawk-nose stuck out. Skinny Kanse. "What's yer business here?" he snarled.

"Tell Evans it's eight o'clock. I'll pick a table." Matt turned to go.

"I said what's yer business?" growled the gunny.

Matt stared down at him, then suddenly drove his shoulder into the door. It banged open and he plowed through, shoving the little man aside.

A pile of money lay on the table. The tough they called Injun Pete was standing at one side of the table. By the light of a big kerosene lamp Gates Evans was peeling bills off a roll, handing them to the squatty man. He spun when the door opened. Then he relaxed. He turned a thin, crooked smile on Matt Harte.

"You, eh? Sheep in for the fleecing." He continued to smile. "Skinny, show this sucker a table." He said to Matt, "Be through with payday in a minute."

Matt followed Skinny Kanse to a corner table. He was wondering about the pay-off. Big bills, and a lot of them. What could Injun Pete have done to earn that much? Matt shrugged. He had his own

job to do—and his own score to even. He sat down at the table while Skinny loitered nearby, watching him with small nervous eyes. Matt felt the tension growing within him.

A voice roared out from behind. Evans. "Hey, everybody," he yelled. "Got a tinhorn here that thinks he can stand up to a real card player. The show's free!"

Then Evans dragged a chair up, sat down cockily. While a score of men crowded around, somebody threw two packs of cards on the table, then the box of chips.

"How much yuh want?" Evans' black eyes bored into Matt, and the hooked smile was fixed on him.

"Five thousand dollars." Matt hauled out his money belt, took out the wad and threw it to the Hung Crick's owner. "How much yuh puttin' against it?"

The thin smile broadened. "There's fifteen thousand in the safe. It's all on the table."

Matt nodded, picked up one deck of cards. He broke them open and they cut for deal. Matt won and shuffled, fast. "Fifty dollars ante for draw," he said.

One of the onlookers whistled. Even Gates Evans lost his smile for a moment. A card game that started with fifty dollars would end sky-high. No doubt about it, the game was going to break somebody.

Evans narrowed his eyes, intent on Matt's hands. Matt grinned a little to himself. A two-man game could be hard on the eyes. He picked up his cards. Two little pairs. He glanced up, waited for Evans' open.

"Hundred dollars or get out," Evans said.

Matt called and they each took a card.

The mocking smile still came across the table at him. "Three hundred," rasped Evans.

Nothing new had come into Matt's hand. But he decided to play the early part of the game wild. He called the bet.

"Two pairs beat me," Evans said.

MATT threw down his cards and raked in the pot. He saw that Evans' smile was gone, then returned suddenly. Matt began to grin too. He laughed as Evans threw fifty dollars ante in the pot. He called the ante, let the five cards lie as Evans dealt them. He opened for fifty.

"Gambler's open, Evans. Without looking."

Evans glared across at him. Playing blind didn't seem to be to his liking. Grumbling, he pushed the fifty dollars in.

"No cards," Matt said. "Check the bet." Still he didn't look at the five cards lying face-down on the table.

"Checked to me," Evans muttered. His smile was slowly disappearing. He drew two cards, pushed a hundred dollars in the pot.

"I feel lucky tonight," Matt said. "I'll call." He watched carelessly as Evans turned three jacks over. Matt slid a chip under his hand, flipped the five cards.

"All spades!" someone gasped. Another voice said, "Can't run that luck all night."

Matt laughed in Evans' face. Win or lose the last hand, he had wanted to get on the gambler's nerves. It had obtained the desired effect. He kept on playing it fast, seemingly foolish. "Ante two hundred," he said, "and watch my hands when I deal, Evans."

Matt didn't try luck all night. He steadied down, while trying to make Evans think him a fool. His nerves were taut as a bowstring. For three years he had worked for this night. Three years work, for a chance to even up the loss of half-share in an up-and-coming cattle ranch. To even up for the shame, and for the bullet hole in his shoulder.

By nine o'clock he had ten thousand dollars worth of chips in front of him. And he was playing it straight. Eagle-eyes on Evans' hands and a little more than his share of luck had done it. Evans' smile was gone now, his shoestring tie twisted. Evans muttered, "There's closer to twenty than fifteen thousand in the safe."

Matt smiled. Then he saw two men move up to the table. Jake was one of them. The other was blond young Bill Cherney. A bleak frown creased Cherney's forehead. Drinking hard, it seemed.

Jake scowled at his one-time partner. "Making any money, gambler?"

Matt grinned at him. "Easy pickin's, Jake. Say, Cherney, any talk on yer dad's killer?"

Cherney shook his head. "Twenty-five hundred reward I'm offerin'. And five

hundred more if'n I can tie the knot and whip the hoss out from underneath."

Matt settled back to the game. Then he saw it happen. Just a flicker of Evans' eyes as Matt dealt him the fifth card. Matt looked at his own. Three aces. Evans had covered up again, and the smile was back. But Matt knew. Evans had big stuff. And Matt knew that his three aces were still in the game. On the bottom of the deck he had glimpsed the ace of hearts.

"How about a thousand dollars open, just to pep up the game," Gates Evans said.

Matt grinned. "Make it five and I'll play." He pushed a thousand dollar stack out, then four more.

Evans didn't lose his smile, but his black eyes flickered uneasily. The room was cloaked with silence. Somebody's gun handle clanked against wood and it sounded like a gunshot.

"I'll look." Evans pushed out four stacks. Then he laid his cards face down. "Got enough, Harte."

MATT picked up the deck. For a moment he stared into Evans' watchful, somewhat nervous black eyes. Twenty or thirty other sets of eyes were glued to the deck. This was it, Matt knew. Three years of card handling were tied up in one move. He flung the top card off into the middle of the table, and thirty sets of eyes followed it. They didn't see the bottom card ride up his sleeve with the same movement.

Jake saw it. Not the card, but the almost invisible change in Matt's face. Jake knew him too well. It doesn't matter, Matt thought. Evans had done the same to him. Payment in kind. And now it was going to break Gates Evans. Jake turned and walked away from the table. Matt tried to shake the guilty feeling out of him.

"Two thousand open," Evans barked.

Matt smiled at him. He stared into the black eyes, and moved one hand out to the chips. He shoved pile after pile into the middle of the table. The last chip he flipped over his shoulder. At the same time he changed the card up his sleeve for the one he had drawn. "One over the shoulder for luck," he said. "Call what-

ever you can afford." He was grinning.

Evans had lost his smile. There was no use holding it any longer. Every cent that the two men possessed was on the table. "Call the works," he rasped.

Matt laid his hand down carefully, spread out the four aces. Evans pushed heavily to his feet. "Beats me," he muttered. They walked toward the office, through the dead silence that had fallen over the saloon. The crowd buzzed, then broke out into a roar.

Matt Harte had busted the Hung Crick! Some shouted, clapped Mat on the back. He noticed that Jake wasn't among them.

In the office, Evans was smiling again, the corners of his mouth hooked down. He twirled the tumblers on the safe, brought up big packs of greenbacks. He counted them off. With Matt's original stake there was nearly twenty-five thousand on the office table.

"I hate to lose," Evans said. But somehow he didn't seem as angry as Matt had visioned. He'd expected one of the sweetest fruits to be the look on Gates Evans' face. But he was smiling. "Maybe you and me could do business together, Harte. I'm willing to forget what's gone by." He turned to the cowmen, who were drifting off to the bar. "If you fellows don't mind, we might talk a little business here." They left and he closed the door.

Matt glanced around. A table, a big lamp on it, an outside door, and the bar door. "I'm movin' on, Evans," he said. "I don't have any business here in Hung Crick."

"How about M Bar J?"

"I'm no cowman anymore."

"You're like me, eh?"

Something broke inside of Matt Harte. Like Evans! He looked at the pasty white face, the black coat, hat, shoestring tie. Like Evans! They even looked a bit alike—the same height and build. Same kind, both fleecing men with jumping cards and marked decks.

Evans slid home the bolt on the bar door. "Aren't you goin' to take the money off the table?" Evans said.

Matt saw it then. The hooked smile, the dark outside, the pockets full of money. No wonder Evans had smiled after losing. "So that's what happened to old Bill Cherney, eh? Walked out in the

dark with a roll on him. Body was carried up the road to be found there, eh?"

Evans' eyes were glittering and his mouth was a straight, thin line. "Take your money and go."

"You go first. I've got a hunch there's two men out in the dark, one a breed Indian, another named Skinny. And the first tall man in black gets—"

EVANS' hand was darting for his pocket. Matt slashed for Colt butt, came up as lamplight glinted off a gold-worked derringer. He triggered, and his gunroar filled the room along with the



Two sixguns roared . . .

flash and boom of the derringer. Evans screamed, clutched his broken hand.

Matt felt nothing, knew he hadn't been hit. But he heard the tinkling of glass. Flame burst up on his left. The lamp bowl was shattered, kerosene flooding over the table. Then the lamp toppled, crashed. The flame caught, spread over the table.

Suddenly Matt laughed. He held his gun on Evans, watched the coal oil flood over the crisp banknotes, burning and curling them up. "The money!" screamed the gambler. "Harte, the money's burning!"

"It's mine," Matt laughed. "It's my money that's burning."

Evans rushed to the table, clutched several rolls of bills, some burning, the rest soaked in kerosene. He leaped to the door, crazily. He flung it open.

Matt felt the tension breaking too, and he laughed again, watching the crazed Evans throw himself out the door, his hands full of flaming money. Two sixguns roared. Evans lunged back into the room, crashed face down, unmoving. The first tall man dressed in black that went out

(Continued on page 127)



Chet whirled for the sound, and saw a dark shape looming up over him. . . .

Chapter I

HELLO, HELLTOWN

THE man who called himself Chet Gregory was nervous when they made camp that night. He'd been jittery ever since he'd seen the stranger watching them with a telescope early that morning. And Chet had lived alone long enough to develop a sixth sense to warn when danger is near.

"Grub's ready, kid," Big Foot John

called from the campfire. "Fill your belly. Then go take the feed bags offa the mules."

Chet dug into his heaped-up plate of beans, bacon and sourdough bread. At the same time he studied Big Foot John across the campfire. The fire glistened on Big Foot's blueblack beard as his big jaws worked on his food.



Trail of Broken Necks!

Gripping Manhunt
Novel

By

JAMES SHAFFER

Chet Gregory, owlhooter, would need all his blood-red guts and lobo savvy to shake loose from the backtrail that had given him both gold and power, and seek instead an honest grave in some forgotten boothill — where he might win forever the friendship and respect of God-fearing neighbors!

"Ever been jumped on this trail?" Chet asked the big man.

"How come you ask that, Kid?" Big Foot grunted through a mouthful of beans. Chet shrugged.

"Just wondered. Them supplies we're freighting are worth a lot of money back in the gold fields. And they cost a lot of money down at the rail terminal. They'd be worth looting."

Big foot nodded somberly. "That they would. Worth as much as the gold everybody's digging out of the hills. But quit your worrying. Rock City hung a bunch

of road agents a few weeks back. Cleaned out the whole gang. We ain't gonna be bothered."

"Maybe, but I'd ought to—"

"What's the matter? You ain't gun-shy, be you? Since I loaned you that gun, you act like you're afraid to tech it." His eyes bored into Chet's. "You afraid of guns, kid?"

Afraid of guns! It would have sounded like a joke to Chet, except it was too grim to be a joke. His dad had taught him to use a gun before he'd taught him how to use a knife and fork. But three weeks ago,

when his dad had died, he'd promised never to handle one again. But there he was packing one.

THREE weeks ago, he'd come out of this very mountain, walking warily into Monkville, and Chet had hoped to get a job. A job that would take him out of this part of the country. Out of this part of the country where somebody might recognize him.

But there weren't any jobs on the railroad, and his few dollars had give out fast. Things were high in Monkville. It was then that he'd run into Big Foot John.

"I'm freighting supplies up the new diggins at Rock City," Big Foot had boomed. "Working for a gent named Silas Hornblow. Had another man working with me, but he got hisself kilt over a dancehall girl. You're skinnier'n hell, but I can use you. Want the job?"

Chet had hesitated. He'd wanted to get out of this country, out of these hills. But Big Foot was impatient. He needed a man.

"Good chance for advancement," Big Foot had urged. "I got me a ranch, all paid for, up north. Aim to quit after one more trip. You'll get my job and pay. Takes money to travel."

Chet had accepted, even though it meant going right back into the country he wanted to leave forever. It meant traveling the same trails he'd known since he could remember—the trails he wanted to leave and never see again.

But a person had to eat, and a kid twenty years old needed a lot. Chet had swallowed his ambition for that railroad job. Maybe there'd be an opening when he and Big Foot got back. If not, Chet would have money enough for a train ticket to some other place.

"Don't worry, kid, we ain't gonna be bothered," Big Foot went on. Rock City cleaned out the last road agents a few weeks back. And that owlhooter that used to work these parts—Shad Gurney—he was kilt more'n six months ago."

Chet tried not to show any emotion at the mention of Shad Gurney's name, but he was glad the flickering campfire hid the hot blush that crept into his cheeks.

"Nope. Nothing'll happen this trip," Big Foot went on, "I feel it in my bones.

My luck'll last—and me an my gal will head out for that little ranch I bought."

"Your gal? Going to git married?"

Big Foot roared with laughter. "Was married twenty-some years ago. Wife died 'bout eight years ago. The gal I'm talking about is my daughter. Hell, she's as old as you are, just about." He pulled a paper from his pocket. "Here's the deed to my ranch. All paid for. Now—"

But Chet was nervous and couldn't sit still. He kept thinking of the man with the glass who had been watching them.

"I'll tend to the mules," he muttered and hurried away. The sturdy pack animals were finishing the last of the grain in their feed bags. Silas Hornblow expected Big Foot to take good care of his animals, and the pack mules got the best of treatment. Chet started taking the feed sacks off and hobbling the animals so that they could graze through the night.

Suddenly, one of the mules shied at something. Chet froze, his hand dropping to his gun. Another mule jerked nervously, and Chet heard a twig break. He whirled toward the sound, and saw the dark figure of a man looming up out of the darkness.

"Big Foot—I!"

He barely got the two words out. The man's arm was swinging. Chet tried to duck the blow, but he was too late. Something hit him on the side of the head. A thousand sparks exploded through the night. He staggered and went down to his knees, still fighting doggedly to his consciousness.

"Coming, kid!" Big Foot's voice boomed through the night. Faintly, Chet heard the big man's stomping run. Right near him he heard the click of a gun being cocked.

"There's your target—yuh can't miss," a low voice said. Chet tried to call out, but his whole body felt numb. And just then the gun blasted. He saw the tongue of orange flame leap from its muzzle, heard Big Foot's choked cry of pain.

Lying as he was, he could barely see Big Foot. The bullet had knocked the big freighter to his knees. But he wasn't done in. Big Foot drew his gun and fired! His aim was bad. The gun above Chet thundered again, and he heard the lead slap into Big Foot's broad chest.

"Damn!" the voice above Chet rasped. "He sure as hell takes a lot of killing!"

The gun flamed one more time. Chet heard the choked cry that welled up out of Big Foot's throat. He knew that sound only too well—the sound of a man expelling the last breath in his life.

"He's done. Now the kid."

Chet tried to move his body, but the blow on his head had numbed the last ounce of strength in him. He lay as he had fallen—on his side, his head twisted around. Although his body couldn't move, his mind was active.

In a minute they'd put the muzzle of a gun against his head and blow his brains out. And he'd die without ever leaving this cursed country, without ever seeing what the rest of the world looked like, or finding out how real, law-abiding people lived.

A LIGHT flared up in his eyes. The gun flash, he thought. He flinched, waiting for the bullet. But he felt no more pain, and it took him a moment to realize that the light wasn't a gunflash. One of the men had struck a match.

"It's him, all right," someone said, and there was gloating in the voice. "I'd know him anywhere."

"Rip his shirt and make sure," another voice said. Rough hands grabbed Chet. He heard a ripping sound and felt the cold night wind on his bare shoulder.

"There's the scar—hey, he's still conscious!"

"Use the blackjack again."

He saw the ugly little blackjack lift in the light of the match and he tried to lift his arm, but his movements were feeble. He was trying to see the men's faces. In the match light he couldn't make them out. He saw one thing—the hat one man wore.

It had a curious droop on the side of the brim. A funny-looking droop, and a snakeskin band around the crown. He couldn't stop the blackjack—and then he knew no more. . . .

For a long time he lay still after he opened his eyes, trying to remember where he was and what had happened. He was lying on the ground, and his feet were cold. He moved them, and discovered that they were sticking out of his blanket. That was funny. He always rolled up in

his blanket, so his feet wouldn't stick out. And his head—it ached like something awful.

Remembrance began to flood through him. The fight last night. Big Foot shot down; the men tearing his shirt and hitting him with a blackjack. And the blanket? How had he gotten that?

He flung it off and sat up, his jaw dropping slack with surprise. He wasn't at the camp. He and Big Foot had camped in a small clearing. He was lying in some thick brush. He got to his feet. His head was splitting open. He stumbled through the brush.

The whole thing must be just a bad dream. Ahead, a hundred yards or so, was the clearing where he and Big Foot had camped. Sprawled in the clearing where he had fallen the night before was Big Foot.

He walked over to the camp and spread a blanket over the corpse. Then he looked around. He wasn't much surprised to find both the mules and the supplies gone. Gone without a trace.

"Looters," he muttered. "Trail looters. Damn 'em—"

It was then that he remembered his torn shirt. He felt of it to make sure. It was torn all right. Those men had known about that scar on his shoulder. They'd known who he really was. They knew his name wasn't Chet Gregory.

But if they'd known who he was, why had they left him alive? Why had they carried him from the camp and even thrown a blanket over him?

Was it because those men had known his dad? Was it because they had felt loyalty to him, through their association with his father? Was that the reason? No. The kind of men his dad had associated with would never have such feelings as that.

More likely they wanted him alive because of the things he knew—about these hills and mountains, the dim trails that led to hidden valleys and caves, where a man could laugh at his pursuers.

He swore angrily. He was through with all that, and no one would ever change him now. He would head straight back to Monkville and ride the first freight out of town. Then he looked at Big Foot's body.

Big Foot had been good to him during the short time he'd worked for him. Giving him a decent burial was the least he could do. He started gathering rocks to build a cairn. There was nothing to dig a grave with. He was halfway through the job when he remembered Big Foot's talk about his daughter.

Maybe there was something in Big Foot's pockets the girl would want. He went through them, and when he laid the stuff out, he whistled in surprise. There was something all right. In Big Foot's hip pocket there was a clear deed to a ranch in Colorado.

"That belongs to his daughter now," Chet told himself. "But how'll I get it to her? He stared up the trail toward Rock City. He knew the answer to that. The only way was to go on to Rock City. Big Foot's boss, Silas Hornblow, would know where the man's daughter was.

But that strange sixth sense was warning him, sending a faint tingle down his spine. Men there knew who he was. For his own sake, he should turn and go back to Monkville—out of this country. Then he stared at the deed.

"If my dad had left me anything, I'd of shore thanked the person that brung it to me."

He tucked the deed in his pocket, shook off the feeling that told him to head down his backtrail, and started walking toward Rock City.

Chapter II

KILLER

ROCK CITY was the ugliest town Chet had ever seen, though he had seen few towns. It was a sprawling conglomeration of unpainted shacks, log cabins and tent houses. It hadn't been laid out at all—it was just scattered all over the place.

Chet paused at the edge of it and looked it over with disgust. Although he'd lived around here all his life, it was his first glimpse of Rock City. The town, a gold boom town had mushroomed fantastically during the months that Chet had nursed his dad.

It was the afternoon of the second day after the murder of Big Foot. Chet had

sewed his shirt up the best he could, and was wearing his brush jacket over it. He picked out what passed as the main street and started trudging through the thick dust.

Set square in the middle of the jumble of buildings, was a huge log affair, two stories high. It dominated the whole town, and a big, garish sign spread across the face of the building, said Jack's Fogg's Palace of Joy. Chet looked around, trying to pick out the store that belonged to Silas Hornblow. A bust of laughter came from the Palace of Joy and a crowd of men surged out onto the sidewalk. He approached them.

"Can you tell me where I'll find Silas Hornblow's . . ."

He stopped, staring at one of the men. The face wasn't familiar, neither were his clothes or the way he walked. But the hat had the same droop on the side of the brim, the same rattlesnake hatband.

The five men had fallen silent at Chet's approach. At first they eyed him with open curiosity, but as Chet stared at Droopy Hat, their eyes narrowed and hardened.

"What the hell's the matter with you, kid?" one of them rumbled.

"You!" Chet yelled, pointing at Droopy Hat. "You looted the pack train—you was in the crowd! You jumped Big Foot John and me night before last!"

"Shut up and g'wan about your business, you punk," Droopy Hat said hoarsely. Chet's yelling had attracted attention. Men walking along the street had paused to hear what he had to say. One of the men with Droopy Hat cursed Chet roundly and ordered him on his way.

"Like hell!" Chet shrilled. "I'm taking that man to the law! He's a trail looter."

Droopy Hat snarled an oath and came off the sidewalk in a rush. His head was down, and his fist were pumping out toward Chet. And then something else happened. A gun blasted in the heat of the afternoon. Chet's hat jumped from his head and sailed into the dust.

He jerked his eyes upward. The shot had come from one of the second floor windows of the Palace. Chet caught a quick glimpse of a big, round face, red from sunburn. And a blond mustache. It was only a quick glimpse, but then he saw

the face through a cloud of gunsmoke.

Chet's attention had been drawn from Droopy Hat's charge for an instant. And in that instant, Droopy Hat landed. Chet felt the man's fists smash against his nose, and he staggered backwards. He lost his footing and went rolling in the dust. Droopy Hat snuffled his delight and started forward again. A man yelled somewhere. The voice had a ring of authority in it. It stopped Droopy Hat dead in his tracks. He let Chet lie, and turned and ran.

"You won't get away!" Chet yelled. He sprang to his feet and raced after the man. Droopy Hat raced across the sidewalk and into the swinging doors of the Palace. Chet hammered after him. One of the man's cronies shoved his foot out. Chet went sprawling on the sidewalk. He leaped to his feet and charged into the Palace, in time to see his quarry disappearing out the back door.

The place was crowded, even at this time of day. Chet started running, shoving through the crowd. Suddenly a bartender loomed in front of him. The bartender had a tray of beer glasses. Chet hit him solidly; the tray and glasses went flying. The bartender swore and swung at Chet's head.

He tried to duck, but he didn't make it. He took another dive into the sawdust. And when he finally reached the back door, there was no sign of Droopy Hat. He ran a hundred yards in one direction, then doubled back, but in a few minutes, he was hopelessly confused by the jumble of houses and buildings. He turned a corner, still running, and found himself back on the main street of town.

WHATEVER excitement he had caused a moment ago had already died down. In Rock City, men were too intent on digging out gold to pay attention to anything else. Chet looked over at the Palace. Two of Droopy Hat's friends still lounged by the front door. They watched him a moment, then swaggered inside. He glanced up at the window. He thought he saw the same face, but he couldn't be sure. Chet stopped a bearded miner.

"Where could I find Silas Hornblow's store?"

"Back of the hotel," the miner told him.

"And tell Silas to hurry up with them supplies he's got coming in. I'm gettin' low on flour."

Chet found the store all right—a big rambling structure of unpainted pine. He walked across the porch and opened the front door. A bell tinkled somewhere, and a girl hurried forward.

"Can I help you?"

Chet stared at her, and then dragged his hat off self-consciously. He'd seen girls all right. A lot of times, his dad's friends had brought women out to his dad's place. But they had painted their cheeks to make them look prettier. And they had talked and laughed in high, shrill voices. This girl was different. She didn't need anything to make her look pretty. And her voice, when she spoke, was soft and low. It sort of fell on a man's ears like music.

"I want to see Mr. Hornblow, please ma'am," Chet stammered.

"In the office in the back," the girl told him. He stammered his thanks and hurried back to the rear of the store. Silas Hornblow was seated at a makeshift desk, going over his books. He looked up, and Chet decided that Hornblow looked more like an old cattleman than he did a storekeeper.

"What's on your mind, younker?"

"It's—it's about Big Foot John," Chet blurted.

"What about him? Where is he? He was due in here this morning early."

"He—he won't be in," Chet said quietly. Hornblow's tanned face turned a shade paler. His gnarled fingers gripped the edge of the desk a moment.

"What're you saying?"

"We was jumped night before last—on the trail. They—kilt Big Foot and looted the pack train."

"Big Foot dead."

Chet nodded dumbly. And then he heard a quick flurry of light footsteps out in the store. The girl ran into the office, and in that awful second, Chet knew the whole story.

"Dad—dad!" the girl's voice was a choked whisper. Hornblow got out of his chair and slipped an arm awkwardly around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry you had to hear it this way, Nina," the storekeeper mumbled. "Here,

you git your bonnet and run along home. I'll git Miz Brown to come over with you—"

"No! I want to know what happened." She whirled on Chet, anger showing through the grief on her face. "Who did it?"

"I—I don't know, ma'am," Chet stammered. "It was dark. I went out to tend them critters. Somebody slugged me. Your dad come a-running and they shot him down." Suddenly he remembered Droopy Hat.

"Mr. Hornblow! I seen one of the men that done it—just as I come into town."

"What's that?"

"He and four other fellows came out of the Palace. I yelled at him and he told me to shut up. I kept yelling and he started for me. Then somebody took a shot at me, and while I was dodging, thinking there'd be another shot, this hombre hit me and got away. But I'd know him anywhere."

"If it was dark when the attack occurred, how could you recognize this man?"

"By his hat," Chet said excitedly. He described the droopy hat, and the snake-skin band.

"That crowd in the Palace," Hornblow muttered angrily. "Mighta knowed it." He looked up at Chet shrewdly. "Where'd this hombre go?"

"He ran out the back of the Palace. I lost him."

"You say he was with some other men. Did they run, too?"

"No, they were still hanging around the Palace, last I saw 'em."

HORNBLOW grabbed his hat. "Come along with me," he ordered. He lifted a worn gunbelt and holster from a peg and strapped it around his waist. Then he lifted the Colt and checked the loads carefully. "You point out the gents that was with this droopy hat hombre. I'll do the rest!" They headed for the front door, the girl tagging along.

"Nina, this ain't gonna be no place for a woman," Hornblow told her.

"I'm coming. There's no use arguing," the girl said with dry-eyed grief. Hornblow started to argue, then shrugged and led the way. The few loungers around

the door of the Palace watched their approach with mild curiosity.

"Any of them with Droopy Hat?" Hornblow asked. Chet stared at the men, sudden confusion muddling his memory.

"Don't think so," he said. "I—I might have a little trouble pointing out Droopy Hat's friends. I wasn't paying attention to anybody but Droopy Hat."

"Come on," Hornblow grunted. As they approached the Palace, a tall gangling man slouched up the sidewalk toward them. Hornblow raised his hand. "Marshal Riner! Up here. Maybe have some work for you."

The gangling man didn't increase his pace. He looked like the worst kind of a loafer—until he got close. Then Chet could see his cold gray eyes, the hard line of his jaw, and the way his hands hung free and easy near the butt of his sixgun. Chet knew enough about gunmen to know that Marshal Riner could handle any trouble he might meet.

"Something?" Riner drawled, as he drew close.

"My freighter, Big Foot, was jumped by trail looters and killed. This kid claims he saw one of them that did it. Claimed the man came out of the Palace."

"Sorry about Big Foot, Miss Nina," Marshal Riner went on in his slow voice. "Whyn't you go home?"

"I'm staying," the girl said positively. The marshal drooped one shoulder in a gesture of resignation. He shifted his tobacco cud from one cheek to the other and eyed Chet deliberately.

"Name? And the rest of it, while you're at it."

"My name's Chet Gregory. Big Foot hired me down in Monkville. Said his helper had been killed in a fight. Night before last I left the fire to go look at the mules. Somebody slugged me. I yelled for help and Big Foot started running. They shot 'im down without a chance."

"And you seen one o' the hombres in the crowd coming out of the Palace?"

"That's right. He was with four other men. I yelled at him, and he started to rush me—"

"Howdy, Marshal!" A booming voice drowned out Chet's words. He turned and saw the big man pushing through the doors of the Palace. Big was right. The

man topped well over six feet, and had a frame to go with such a body. But it wasn't the man's body that interested Chet. It was his face.

It was the same face that he'd seen at the upstairs window right after somebody had taken a shot at him. The big man flashed a mechanical smile as he came down the steps.

"What's all the ruckus, Marshal?"

"Hiya, Jake," Marshal Riner droned. This, then, must be Jake Fogg, owner of the Palace. "Big Foot John was killed on the trail," Riner went on. He waved a languid, lazy hand at Chet. "Chet Gregory here claims he seen one of the looters come out of the Palace."

Jake Fogg turned his gaze on Chet, and something in his pale blue eyes made cold sweat break out on Chet's forehead.

"Chet Gregory? Is that what he calls himself?" Fogg boomed.

"So he claims," Marshal Riner said, apparently about to yawn. "C.G. He's got his initials worked into his belt. Reckon that sorta cinches it."

"Sure," Fogg retorted sarcastically. "C.G. *could* stand for Chet Gregory. It could also stand for Chadwick Gurney, son of Shad Gurney, the outlaw!"

Chapter III

YOU'LL BE SAFE IN BOOTHILL!

FOR a moment there was dead silence, then a man swore softly. Chet knew without turning that it was Silas Hornblow.

"Surprised, ain't you, Hornblow?" Fogg chuckled. "Shad Gurney hated you all his life. He raided your cattle till he finally broke you. Broke the Horn and Spur, the richest ranch in this state. Broke you from the richest cattleman in the state down to a two-bit storekeeper in a gold boom town. And now he's trained his son to carry on."

"That's a lie!" Chet yelled. "My dad was outside the law—'cause they drove him there. But I ain't never done nothing crooked in my life."

"But you admit that you're Chad Gurney—Shad's son," Fogg said slyly.

"Supposing I am," Chet answered. "That don't make me an outlaw."

"Old Shad taught you all the tricks, all right," Jake Fogg said with mock admiration. "How to get hired on that pack train, and how to plunder it when the time come."

"I didn't plunder the pack train," Chet yelled. "I've never broken the law in my life."

Silas Hornblow cleared his throat loudly. "Accusing this youngker of plundering the pack train don't hold water, Fogg. If he done it, why'd he come to town to tell me about it?"

"You forget that Shad Gurney's whole mission in life was to break you—bankrupt you, and turn you into a bum."

"Now just a minute—" Hornblow started angrily.

"You're packing one lie on top of another," Chet broke in. "My dad didn't even know Silas Hornblow. I never heard him mention his name."

Fogg was still smiling. "You never heard your dad mention the name Si Blowhard?"

"Si—Si Blowhard," Chet gasped, staring at Hornblow.

Fogg went on relentlessly. "That was your dad's pet name for Hornblow—and we don't have to ask whether he ever mentioned him. Your face told us that."

"'Pears to me like you know a lot about Shad Gurney, Fogg," Marshal Riner put in lazily. "Mebbe *you'd* ought to explain—"

"Sure," Fogg boomed loudly. "I used to know Shad Gurney while he was still an honest rancher. Before Silas Hornblow broke in. Before Silas Hornblow led a bunch of vigilantes to Gurney's house one night and killed Gurney's wife—"

"It was a stray shot!" Silas Hornblow broke in. "My men had orders not to shoot at the house. Just shoot in the air. A bullet must have ricocheted. No bullet from my men killed his wife!"

Cold sweat was breaking out all over Chet, as this kind of talk dredged up old forgotten memories of the past; things that had seared his soul as a youngster. The memory of that night his mother had died was dim; he'd been just four years old when it happened. He remembered his dad taking him to town after the funeral. His dad had sworn vengeance on Silas Hornblow. Si Blowhard, his dad

had called him. He remembered now.

He remembered his dad setting him up on the bar in the saloon and baring his shoulder, showing the birthmark that Chet carried there.

"I'll break Si Blowhard if it kills me," his dad had sworn. "And if I can't do it, then my son will! And if it has to be my son that does it, you'll all know him by that mark on his shoulder."

And after that, he and his dad didn't go back to their home any more. They had moved far back into the hills. For a while they'd lived in a cave, until his dad had found a hidden valley, and he'd built a little sod shanty there. It was the only home that Chet had known, all these years.

As he grew older, he began to realize what it meant when his dad and some men would ride out of the hidden valley and be gone for days at a time. And his dad would come back, bragging about how many cattle of Si Blowhard's they had rustled that trip.

THAT'S the way life had been until six months ago, when his dad had ridden back with a bullet in his stomach. Only two men had come back with him that time. Both of them were wounded, too. The rest had died in a gunfight. One of the wounded men died. The other recovered and rode out.

His dad had lingered for months in agony, until death had mercifully put an end to his suffering.

"Stray shot or not," Fogg was saying. "Gurney blamed you for the death of his wife. He raided your ranch all these years, until he broke you. Shad Gurney was bad hit in the last raid he ever pulled. Later on, the law caught one of his gang who confessed that Gurney was dying. That was after you'd gone broke and was running this store up here. So Shad trained his son to carry on—to bust you complete, Hornblow!"

Chet looked around at the ring of faces. Silas Hornblow looked perplexed. The girl was looking at him with loathing in her eyes. Jake Fogg was smiling his genial smile. Only Marshal Riner seemed to be unaffected by the whole thing. He looked as if he were ready to drop off to sleep.

"You ain't told us why the kid would come to town and tell Hornblow that the train was plundered," Riner drawled lazily.

Jake Fogg nodded agreement with the lawman. "That puzzled me too—till I got to thinking. Shad Gurney was smart—and he'd teach his kid to play it smart. And that's what this younker is doing."

"Keep on," Riner said, suppressing a yawn.

"The kid plundered the wagon train. He knows every wrinkle of these hills. He hides the plunder and comes on to town—with a story that Big Foot hired him. He gets Silas Hornblow to hire him in Big Foot's place. So Hornblow gives the kid money to go down to Monkville for another train of supplies. Don't you see how it would work? The kid keeps draining money from Hornblow till he's broke."

Chet looked at the girl again, then quickly averted his eyes. Stark hatred burned at him.

"It sounds like one of Shad Gurney's tricks, all right," Hornblow admitted grudgingly. "And the kid's grown up in these mountains. He'd know of a dozen places to hide a pack train of goods."

"The whole thing is a lie!" Chet shouted. "Look, I'll draw you a map of these hills. I'll show you every spot within forty miles where you could even hide a chicken feather. You can search every one of them places—"

"You lying whelp," Jack Fogg roared. The big man came charging toward Chet, his face contorted with anger. Chet was stunned by the sudden change of Fogg's attitude. And before he could recover, Fogg's fist landed on the side of his head. Chet staggered backwards and sprawled in the dust.

"Shad Gurney's whelp ain't starting in on this town," Fogg roared. "We got troubles enough of our own."

He rushed at Chet, boot drawn back for a vicious kick. Chet tried to roll away, but he saw he wasn't going to make it. Then Marshal Riner moved. One hand snaked out and grabbed Fogg's shoulder. Fogg outweighed Riner by a good thirty pounds, but the smaller marshal handled the big man like a mother handles a baby. He spun him around and sent him slam-

ming against the wall of the Palace of Joy.

"No use roughing 'im up," Riner said mildly. "So far's I know, he ain't charged with no crime yet."

Fogg's eyes were dancing and sparkling with hatred. One big hand dropped to his gun as he glared at the marshal; and his red face was twisted with rage. Then in a twinkling, he was his old genial self.

"Bare his shoulder, Riner," he boomed. "Look at his birthmark. He's Gurney's son, all right."

"Ain't disputing that," Riner said mildly. "Just saying there ain't nothing agin him." He turned to Hornblow. "What you want done, Si?"

Hornblow hesitated a moment, then stepped over to Chet. He peeled back his jacket, and ripped the shirt where Chet had sewed it. When he straightened, his face was gray and grim.

"Gurney's son, all right. I—I guess you'd better keep him under lock and key till we find out what really is going on."

"Why don't you confess that you killed my father?" the girl cried.

"I didn't ma'am—I didn't," Chet mumbled. "That gent with the droopy hat—"

"Git that scum off the streets, marshal! Git him behind bars—before this town has itself a necktie party!" Jake Fogg bellowed. Men had crowded out of the Palace of Joy, standing behind Fogg. They growled their approval of Fogg's threat. Marshal Riner hesitated, then shrugged and lifted Chet's gun.

"The safest place for you is in jail, Chet," the sleepy-looking marshal said quietly. Chet turned one more pleading look at the girl. All of a sudden, it was terribly important that she believe he had nothing to do with her father's death. But Hornblow had his arm around her shoulder, and was leading her up the street.

Chapter IV

BAD TROUBLE AT THE DIGGINS!

THE JAIL was a stout log affair half a block down the street. A curious mob led by Jake Fogg trailed along be-

hind the marshal and his prisoner Chet.

"Only one cell, Gurney," Riner said. "Git in."

"You'd better search him for a knife or something," Jake Fogg said importantly. "That jail is nothing but logs, and he could dig his way out."

"Seems to me like you're taking a lot of interest in this—seeing as how you ain't lost nothing, Fogg," Marshal Riner grunted, as he felt through Chet's pockets.

"I ain't forgetting," Fogg said loudly, "that there ain't but one safe in this town—an old tin can affair over in Si Hornblow's store. Everybody in town keeps his gold there. If this hombre got loose—"

"He ain't gitting loose. Go on about your business," Riner said shortly. Jake Fogg grumbled a little, then left, his crowd of hangers-on trailing behind him. An hour later, Riner brought Chet his supper. He slid it through the opening in the door, then leaned against the wall.

"Gurney, I'm interested in that map you promised to draw—showing all the outlaw hideouts in these hills. Still willing to do it?"

"Why should I do anything for you?" Chet snapped back. "I don't owe you nothing."

"That map might clear up a whole lot," Riner went on persuasively.

"Don't see how it could help me out," Chet grunted. He took his tray over by the window. It was getting dark outside, and there was no light in the cell. He just jabbed at his food and shoved whatever stuck on his fork in his mouth. He heard a slight sound outside his window, and stopped chewing a moment, but the sound wasn't repeated.

"I'll tell you how it could help," Riner said. "With that map—"

Someone flung the front door open and two men tramped in. "Riner, there's some trouble at the diggins north of town. Over a claim. You better come along before there's gunplay."

Chet heard the marshal arguing sleepily with the men, but finally they all moved outside, and he heard them go up the street. Almost immediately, the sound was repeated under his window. Then a dark shadow came into view.

"Hey, kid! You in there?"

"Who're you?" Chet asked quickly.

"Old friend. Used to know your paw. Git ready. We're gonna bust you out of this jail."

"Who's we?"

"Got a friend with me. Used to know your paw, too. Get set, kid. Them bars are just sunk in them logs. They'll give easy, once we dab a rope around 'em and let a hoss pull the rope."

Chet went to the window. He could see the shape of two men and two horses in the darkness. One of the men was shaking out his rope. The other man was acting as lookout. There was something vaguely familiar about the two men, and he looked carefully at their hats. But even in the darkness, he could see that neither hat had a droopy brim.

"How come you're doing this?" Chet asked.

"Told you. We knowed your paw."

"Don't remember ever seeing you, and your voice ain't familiar," Chet said un- easily.

"Knowed Shad a long time ago. You just don't remember," the man said, then his voice grew a little sharper. "Hey, now, if you *don't* want this help, then say so. Hell, I'm risking my neck because I liked old Shad. I figured the least I could do was to help his kid out of a jam."

"You knew Shad, huh? Yeah, mebbe I remember you now," Chet said cautiously. "Long time ago. You and dad used to throw some big drunks together."

"That's right," the man outside whispered heartily. "Lordy, the likker old Shad could drink."

Chet's stomach tightened up into a hard knot. Shad Gurney never touched liquor. The man was a liar. He'd never seen Shad Gurney in his life. He backed away from the window, wanting time to think this thing out. But there wasn't time to think. The man outside was looping the rope around the window bars.

"**Y**OU all set, ain't you kid?" the man growled hurriedly. "We sent the marshal off on a wild goose chase. He won't be gone long. And them bars might make a noise when they give way. You be ready to climb out."

"I want a gun. I feel naked without one," Chet grunted. "The marshal left mine in his office."

The man cursed in a low monotone, then something grated against the bars. "Here's a gun, kid. Shove it in your belt quick, and let's git going."

Chet reached for the gun, then poked his fingers around the cylinder. There wasn't a shell in it. The sweat was breaking out on him again. Something was decidedly wrong. He didn't want to leave the jail; he felt safer inside than he would outside.

Then his jaw tightened grimly, as thoughts raced through his mind. Somehow, this whole business was still tied up with plundering the pack train. Of that he felt sure. Just how, he didn't know. But he figured that the quickest way to find out was play along with his rescuers.

"Let 'er rip," he told the men outside.

"I'm ready to go."

A horse snorted outside. The rope whined a moment, then grew taut. The iron bar creaked and gave a little. One of the logs cracked, the noise loud in Chet's ears. Then the log ripped half apart, and the bar gave completely. The horse snorted at the sudden loosening of the rope, and Chet could hear the two men outside calming him down. He grabbed the window sill and crawled through.

"Take that horse there," one of the men breathed. "And let's go. Down this back street."

"What about the other fellow? There's only two horses!" Chet grunted.

"He ain't going," his rescuer muttered. "Let's get moving."

They swung into the saddle and started down the back street. The other man strolled away. Chet's rescuer led the way through the maze of buildings that made up Rock City. Suddenly the buildings began to thin out as they reached the edge of town. The man ahead pulled up in the deep shadow of a tree.

"We'll wait here," he said softly.

"Wait?" Chet asked impatiently. "How come? Best we put a lot of distance—"

"My friend's gonna send the posse the other way," the man grunted.

He gave a long sigh of satisfaction as a muffled explosion reached their ears. For a moment afterwards, there was dead silence, then a fusillade of shots wracked the night air. Rock City erupted in a wild

burst of gunfire and hoarse yells. Faintly, he could hear the pound of hard running horses. He strained forward, listening. Hoofbeats were coming closer.

A moment later two horsemen—mere dark shadows in the night—raced down a crooked street and past their hiding place. They flashed past a cabin farther down the road, and Chet caught a glimpse of one of the riders. He couldn't recognize the man, but he could see that he was wearing a shirt—a shirt torn at the shoulder.

"In just a minute it'll be safe for us to ride," the man beside Chet grunted. "The posse ought to pass by any minute."

"Jake Fogg must think I'm awfully dumb to fall for a trick like this," Chet said conversationally.

"Huh—Jake—what the hell you talk—damn—I!"

The last word exploded out of the man's mouth as he grabbed for his gun. But his draw couldn't beat the gunbarrel that Chet swung at his head. The barrel connected solidly, and the man slid out of the saddle with hardly a whimper. Chet dropped beside him. He lifted the man's gun and cartridge belt, then swung back into the saddle. Other riders were pouring out of town, racing after the first two.

Chet took the same crooked street he'd ridden down a few minutes before—letting the posse thunder past on another street. As he rode, he jammed cartridges into the empty gun the man had given him, and strapped the cartridge belt around his lean waist.

A half a block from the Palace of Joy, he pulled into the shadows and dismounted. Men were still boiling up and down the street, yelling and shouting. Evidently every man who owned a horse had raced out of town, and those left could do nothing but wait and curse.

CHET took a long look at the Palace of Joy. The street floor was brightly lit. The second floor windows, however, were dark—except for one. The window in front—the one from which Jake Fogg had shot at him. He walked hurriedly up a street for a block, then turned toward the Palace. Excitement in the street was beginning to die down as he approached the rear of the big building. Inside the

saloon, however, the excitement was still at its peak.

Chet stumbled around the darkened rear of the building till he found the outside steps leading to the second floor. They creaked loudly as he went up, and he paused twice to see if he had been noticed. At the top, he found the door locked. He leaned his weight against it, but it wouldn't give. About three feet away was a window. He debated for a moment, then leaned far over and grabbed the window sill.

His feet slid off the top landing of the stairs and for a moment beat a tattoo against the log side of the building. The noise on the first floor drowned it out. No one accosted him as he dragged himself through the window.

He crouched inside the window a moment, panting, taking stock of his situation. A long corridor ran down the center of the upper floor, with doors opening on each side of it. No light showed under any of the doors leading to the side rooms.

Chet lifted both guns, checked their loads carefully and started forward. He was halfway down the corridor when a burst of laughter came from the lighted room—Jake Fogg's.

He gripped the guns tighter and started forward once more. Just then the door opened.

It was Droopy Hat. Right behind him stood Jake Fogg. Two other men loomed in the background. For the space of five full seconds, there was dead, tense silence there in the corridor. Droopy Hat still stood in the doorway, still holding the doorknob. Jake Fogg's face had frozen with one of his big grins on it, and now he looked as if he'd bit into a sour persimmon.

"How much gold did you get out of Si Blowhard's safe?" Chet blurted, breaking the silence. Droopy Hat husked a curse. His hand dropped to his gun, snaked it out. Then Chet's guns were blasting. A slug caught Droopy Hat in the belly and slammed him backwards into Jake Fogg.

Fogg stumbled and Chet's next shot missed. The two other men in the office had their guns out. Lead ripped through the doorway, and whined down the long corridor. Chet breathed a prayer deep inside him. Jake Fogg's gun was add-

ing to the roar and the confusion now.

One of Chet's slugs hit another man, and he staggered out of sight. There were still two men inside that office—shooting hard and fast, Chet dropped to the floor. Jake Fogg's gun blasted and splinters showered into Chet's face. Blood dripped down into his eyes, and he lifted a hand to wipe it away. He heard Jake Fogg's roar of triumph, and he tensed his body against the shock of lead.

But the gunfire came from behind him. And not a sixgun, but the earth-shaking blast of a shotgun. Chet peered through the thick gunsmoke. Only Jake Fogg was still on his feet, and his chest was a mass of blood. He staggered against the desk, trying to lift his gun, one hand clawing at the bloody mess that had been his chest.

"Hell, Jake," Marshal Riner said in a tired voice, "don't make me blow your damn head off. Drop that gun."

FOGG tried once more to get the gun up but his strength was fast running out. The weapon slid from his grasp, and Fogg went to his knees. Chet turned around. Marshal Riner was at the head of the stairs. He stood his shotgun against the wall.

"How come you were in such an all-fired hurry, Gurney?" Riner asked. "You knowed better than to tackle 'em alone. Whyn't you wait till I got here?"

Chet got slowly to his feet. He didn't know whether to laugh or curse at the sleepy-looking lawman. "How in thunder did I know you were coming?"

Riner waved a hand wearily. "I had the whole play figured from the start, just like you did. Fogg found out—probably by accident—that Big Foot John had hired you. He saw a swell chance to make a lot of dough and pack it onto you. The tip-off came when he slugged you—after you'd offered to make a map of all outlaw hideouts in these hills. Fogg didn't want me to have that map. I got a hunch we'll find Hornblow's supplies in one of them hideouts."

"But tonight. How'd—?"

"Shucks, I didn't fall for that old windy they used to get me away from the jail. I came back and watched them two hombres get you out. Thought once I'd

have to help 'em. I figgered Fogg aimed to blow Hornblow's safe and pack that job on to you, too. Even to having a gent ride out of town with a shirt that was tore just like yours."

Riner sauntered down the corridor and into Fogg's office. Chet followed him slowly and watched as Riner hefted a pair of saddlebags laying in the corner of the room.

"This is it. Let's take it back to Hornblow."

"I wish you'd take the freighting job," Hornblow said later, as they sat in his office. The gold had been returned to its proper owners. The safe was a wreck. "It would sorta make me feel better—sort of make up for what I done."

"You mean about my mother?" Chet asked quietly. Hornblow paled slightly, then nodded.

"Idá swore that it wasn't one of my men that fired that shot."

"It wasn't," Chet said. "I don't know what started the fight between you and dad—stubbornness I guess. But you had nothing to do with my mother's death. She was trying to grab the gun out of dad's hand when it went off. Dad told me the whole story just before he died. And he made me promise to go straight."

"Then why won't you take the job?"

Chet shook his head.

"I want to leave these mountains forever," Chet said. "Here, I'm a Gurney, son of the outlaw. I want to go where I can be Chet Gregory—and he like anybody else. That paper is the deed to a ranch up north. Big Foot told me all about it. It belongs to Miss John now, but if she needs a man to help her work it—"

"A ranch!" Hornblow said wistfully. "Where a man can spread out. Nina, if you'd need a—"

"I'll need all the help I can get," Nina John said with a smile. "I'll need an experienced rancher like you, Mr. Hornblow, for a foreman, and a man like Chet Gregory for a—for a—"

"Let's go, Hornblow," Marshal Riner said drowsily. "It's gonna take the rest of the night for them two to say what's on their minds."

"And then some," Chet said, smiling at Nina. And she smiled back.

THE END

By JOHN JO
CARPENTER

He stumbled backwards
and the dogs were hot on
him.



Graveyard Watch

A LOT of men have been killed without any record being made of it here. The Recording Angel must have lots of entries about men who just disappeared off the face of the earth, without a line of writing to mark the de-

parture. Like old Dad Huber. And if they're situated like Dad—a sheepman in a cattle country—no tears are shed.

The old man brought three hundred stinking woollies down Holcomb Creek from God knows where, and was

Many a fortune-hunting hombre has lost his heart, his soul, and his head over such a golden treasure as lay hidden in far-off Schoolhouse Canyon. The dead man's cache honest Old Dad Huber stumbled upon had the strange power to banish him forever from the face of the earth! . . .

established before the cowmen knew he was in the country. He headquartered in Schoolhouse Canyon, a tributary of the creek, settling down in the old prospector's shanty there.

A meeting was held at Duff Pemberly's place, to see what should be done about him. There were six big cow outfits strung out along Holcomb, dependent on its waters, and they didn't dare let sheep get a toehold on the creek. The old prospector, years back, had been threat enough.

The next day Duff sent his son, Boots, to have a talk with Dad Huber, and kind of persuade him he had better shove his sheep on over the horizon, while the shoving was good.

"Don't rush him, Boots. Give him about forty-eight hours to clear out," Duff said.

Boots was twenty-two, a good, steady lad. He had been brought up to hate sheepmen like the Devil hates holy-water. But he came back that night with his brow furrowed. He told his pa it might be a good idea to let Dad Huber stay there.

"The old codger ain't exactly bright, but he ain't foolish, either. He's kilt five lions and run out more 'n a dozen fellers that come in hunting for the Lost Schoolhouse mine. Them few sheep won't do half as much damage as a fire would, supposin' one of them fools huntin' that lost mine was to set one."

He was glad when old Duff agreed, because the other cowmen generally went along with the Pemberlys. Now and then Boots would drop over to visit Dad. The old man had little to say, but now and then he would burst out with a short tale of how things were when he was Boots's age.

He carried a single-shot .32 calibre rifle, a hand-made weapon put together like a 17-jeweled watch. He was never without it. He built a rock fence a little at a time, following the contour of the land cleverly, so he got a minimum of labor while still penning in quite an area of pasture.

And as far as other visitors to Schoolhouse Canyon—well, they never showed up. Formerly it was a rare week when the cattlemen didn't have to run one or

two campers out to keep them from setting fire to the grass and timber. These people had only one thought—the lost mine.

The old cabin where Dad Huber lived was supposed to be haunted by the dead discoverer of the lost mine. He was some kind of a Dutchman, couldn't speak a word of English. One night the Dutchman was hung up by his thumbs by somebody anxious to locate either his mine or his cache of dust. He died, which was a mistake, because he'd have to *lead* anyone to the cache, not being able to speak American.

That was ten or twelve years back. They buried the body back of the canyon. No one ever found the gold.

ONE day Boots rode over to see how the old boy was making out, and to tote him twenty pounds of corn meal and a side of sow-bosom. He found Dad squatting under a tree, watching his wool-lies, with the rifle between his knees.

"I seen the Dutchman's ghost last night," he said suddenly. That was his way of talking. He was so used to silence that he did not know how to break it gently. "The ghost come into the cabin, wringin' its hands and suckin' its sore thumbs, where it was hung up. Stayed around about an hour, it did."

Boots hid a grin. "Wasn't you skeered, Dad?"

"Skeered? Who—me? Pshaw, me and that ghost got along fine. He showed me where the mine was."

"Well, you chase him out the next—he showed you *what*?"

"The mine. Where he got all that dust."

Boots had been pretty small when the Dutchman was camped up there, and he had grown up with a kind of good-natured tolerance for the fool gold legend. Now he began to grow warm, to tingle all over.

"Aw, Dad, quit your foolin'. If he showed you the mine, where is it?"

"Right up the holler there. Come along and I'll show you."

Dad had a bunch of mixed dogs of two strains—sheep dogs and lion hunters. He called some of the lion dogs to him, and sent the others out to watch the sheep while he was gone. The dogs obeyed as

though they understood every word he said.

He led Boots up the canyon not more than a quarter of a mile, and pointed to a small gully which was thickly infested with poison oak. Here was one of the big springs which fed Holcomb Creek. It bubbled out of the gully and down the canyon within a dozen feet of the cabin.

"Now some men can get pizen oak and some can't. I'm one that it never bothers, and so was this Dutchman. He found himself this here pocket of gold, right where he had the water to pan it. And he planted the whole kit and caboodle to pizen oak. If you ain't skeered of the suckerin' stuff—?"

Boots was scared to death of it, but he had the fever by now. He plunged into the thicket after Dad, and sure enough under the tangle of leaves there was the distinct sign where the Dutchman had worked—his cribbing and flume, both in miniature but still adequate, and a weathered pick with an iron pipe handle, and a shovel with the rotted shreds of the wooden handle strewn around it.

"All worked out. There could of been a nice little payday pocket of gold here. A few hunnert dollars, say. Pore old Dutchman! In another week or two he'd of pult his stakes. Then they had to hang him up by his thumbs and kill him!"

Boots squatted there, looking at what was left of a fairly sizable gold pocket. He had seen flecks of mineral here and there during his life, but this was the first time it had ever caught hold of his guts this way.

"I wish I knowed where that dust is hid," he said softly.

Dad gave his short, rusty laugh. "Hid? There wasn't much gold here, son. A man's got to eat as he goes along. I doubt if there was more than fifty, mebbe as much as a hunnert and fifty, left when he died."

Boots got a bad case of poison oak out of that adventure—a really bad case. It was a month before he was up and around enough to ride a horse again. In his worst delirium, he had dreamed that the Dutchman's ghost was pacing his room, wringing its thumbs and trying to tell him where it had hidden an immense cache of dust

and grain gold. And the first place he headed for when he was able to ride was Schoolhouse Canyon.

ARRIVING there, the first thing he saw was that most of the old man's sheep had breached the rock fence and were strewed up and down the creek. He swore a blue streak and turned up the canyon, because he had always liked Dad Huber and hated to see the old boy break his agreement with the cowmen.

Then he saw a few young lambs and aged ewes which hadn't been able to scale the fence. The spring had almost gone dry, and these were near dead of thirst.

He hated sheep but he couldn't stand to see a critter suffer. He opened the rock wall and let them go down to the creek. Then he rounded the whole bunch up, chased them inside, and stopped up the hole again.

It was then that another odd thing struck him. Old Dad usually took his hunters with him when he strayed off, but there were always sheep dogs to guard the sheep.

Today there wasn't a dog to be seen.

He began to see them shortly, though, as he rode up the canyon. They lay dead everywhere, bloated and swollen and showing flecks of green foam on their lips. He examined a few, counting fifteen dead ones.

"Pizen! Arsenic or Paris green. Now what the hell!"

A queer kind of a dread came over him. He rode on up the canyon, and near the poison oak patch he found a sixteenth dog. This was a huge brute in size, but a mere pup in age. It had been old Dad's favorite hunter. It had a streak of bull mastiff, a little bloodhound, perhaps a little bird dog, some wolf- or stag-hound, and a drop or two of pit bull terrier blood in it. He had called it Panama.

Panama was the only one that had not been poisoned. He was shot through the head with a heavy-caliber gun at close range.

Of Dad Huber there was no sign. He went into the deserted cabin, his heart pounding with a strange, nameless terror. The packrats had already been at the old man's scanty belongings. There was a musty, dusty smell—nothing else.

"Pore old man! Pore old devil, I wonder what they did to him?" he murmured, remembering what conscienceless, gold-mad thieves had done to the Dutchman.

He spurred home and set a rider down after Sheriff Sam Figgert. Sam brought a curious mob out with him. The Schoolhouse Canyon legend revived for awhile. Boots had never told anyone why he was foolish enough to catch poison oak until today. Today he felt he had to, because it might help lead them to old Dad Huber—or his body.

They burned off the poison oak, and the proof that there had been a payday mine here sent a fever through the crowd like a gunpowder train. For three weeks there were at least a hundred men combing the foothills, and Boots Pemberly was up earliest and worked the latest. He had the gold fever, too, but he was looking for a friend as well—a kindly, decent, quiet old man whom he had sponsored amongst these cattlemen, sheep and all. An old man who believed in ghosts, but who had strangely found a worked-out mine. A gentle old fellow whose dogs laughed—yes, laughed with pleasure!—when he spoke to them.

But they never found him. They never found anything. They sold old Dad's sheep, and it was voted to put the proceeds in Boots' hands. It came to a little over five hundred dollars. Boots banked it and gave up the quest with a sigh. He was a good, steady lad, and his dad needed his help with the cattle.

IT WAS the second following spring, when Boots was twenty-four, that he and his father rode back to Schoolhouse Canyon for a day's work. After Dad Huber's disappearance, the predatory mountain lions had returned, and they had been losing too much stock here. They led a pack horse with a heavy load of poisoned beef chunks. Every now and then they stopped and dropped one from hands covered with smoked gloves.

All of a sudden Boots saw something sticking out of the clay bank of the canyon, and he gave a yell and tumbled out of the saddle and ran toward it.

It was old Dad Huber's hand-made .32 calibre rifle. Boots had good eyes, and he had recognized that queerly-cut

front sight from a hundred feet away.

They were almost across from the worked-out mine. Here, there had been a small slide, and a few tons of earth and shale had slipped down the side of the canyon. They dug with their bare hands a while, finding nothing. Boots remained behind, while old Duff rode home as hard as he could go to bring help—and shovels.

Another mob soon collected. They dug back into the cave-in and found a skeleton with some odds and ends of rags about it. They thought this was the end of their hunt—Dad Huber's grave. They brought the bones down and wrapped them in a blanket to take to town, so the preacher could give Dad a Christian burial.

Then suddenly somebody's shovel went right through the dirt wall of the canyon into nothing, and a black hole a foot across yawned out at them.

They went crazy for a few minutes, walloping each other with their shovels in their madness and anxiety to be first into that tunnel. Because Boots was youngest and strongest, he went in first, crawling on hands and knees with Sheriff Figgert right behind him.

Almost immediately they came tumbling out, faster than they went in. Boots dived for his rifle and pointed to the top of the canyon, whooping.

An old she-lion popped up out of nowhere, loped along the slope and took to a tree as they began firing. The range was too great, and she sat there a moment. Then she dropped down and ran back and vanished.

"It ain't the cache! It's just a tunnel that starts down here and slopes up to the top. We smelled lion right away only we was too excited to pay any attention to it. Then we see this old hussy and a couple of kittens not five feet from my face. Yi! I like to kick Sam's good tooth out, turning around," Boots said.

They built a fire at the bottom hole and in a moment the old lioness stuck her head out of the top and yowled and ducked back, without giving them a shot. A few more moments passed, and she shot into view again, carrying a kitten in her teeth. They shot her up like a sieve and went in after the other kitten. Boots tried to

keep it as a pet, but it had swallowed too much smoke. It died a day later.

"Must of been a cave-in that opened the den a little," Sheriff Sam Swiggert theorized. "Old Dad prob'ly thought it was where the Dutchman cashed his dust from the lost mine. Or maybe he just smelled lion. When he started inside it caved on him, and nobody would notice a cave-in like that when we was up there before, if the hole was covered again. Then she slid a little more, enough for Boots to see the gun. Well, at least we can give the old man a decent grave."

There were two things that never were explained, however. Sam was having his annual barbecue for law officers when the body and the rifle were found. Among the guests were two San Francisco detectives. One of these pointed out that the old man's skull was cracked. He didn't see how it could happen in a cave-in. Looked to him like a small something-or-other had done the job.

"Pshaw! A small rock hit him!" Sam said.

The other unexplained thing was the poisoned dogs.

"Maybe somebody was up there poisoning lions?" the San Francisco man suggested.

"But Panama was shot," Boots objected.

"The old man shot it himself, probably, when he saw it was having poison fits?"

"Well," Boots said, "that's as good an idee as any."

THAT fall the Showalters shipped a trainload of beeves to Kansas City, and Boots Pemberly went along for the hell of it. They stayed around K.C., pretty well liquored up, for over a week. Boots had been working hard all summer. He was a good, steady boy, and deep in his heart he was anxious to prove to old Duff that he didn't fly off on tangents. Duff had teased him a good bit about his gold-fever, first when Dad turned up missing, second when Dad was found dead.

Boots was late getting to the train when they started home; he caught it on the fly, and came panting down the aisle with an odd look on his face.

"Who do you think I just seen?" he asked Les Showalter, bug-eyed as a girl.

"Old Dad Huber! The sheepman we p-p-picked up d-dead, the feller we seen buried. He seen me, too! He come into the hotel, dressed fit ter kill, with a good-lookin', brown-haired woman about half his age. He seen me starin' at him and cut and ran. He went right off and left that woman a-standin' there!"

"About one quart more, Boots," Les said drily, "and you'd of seen the ghost of the Dutchman. Yes, with a lady ghost, too."

Boots said nothing more after that. About a month later, Duff got ready to ship. He usually sold in Omaha, but Boots talked him into shipping to K.C. He searched all over for Dad Huber, and found no trace.

The night the crew was heading back to California, two K. C. detectives came to the hotel and asked for Boots. They had been getting calls about his carzy questions concerning a dead man and a brown-haired woman. He told them the whole story.

"I reckon I was wrong, though. I blame the liquor. When you've seen a man buried, you don't see him alive again," he said. "You fellers take this fifty-dollar gold piece and forget the hull thing, will you?"

They agreed; but a month later he got this letter:

Dear Sir:

We have located the woman you met with the alleged Missing Person. She is Mrs. Mollie Fenske, a widow, 38 years old. She had previously filed a Missing Persons report concerning one C. J. Harder. In her M.P. report she declared he ran out of the lobby of the hotel and she never saw him again. They were engaged to be married.

This C. J. Harder, she declares, was a miner who made a strike in British Columbia, about eight thousand dollars, and moved to this city to retire. At his home his landlady said he had left suddenly although his rent was paid several months in advance. She described him as quiet and gentlemanly but only a little "queer," in that he believed in ghosts.

We searched his room and found no identification, and cannot legally connect him either with the Missing Person you seek under the name of Huber, or with any other known person. We are unable to trace him further but believe he has left this city.

Trusting this etc. etc. etc.

B. J. Ormond, Chief

Kansas City Police Department

"All prospectors look alike after a while, son," Duff said, when Boots showed him the letter. "They all run to whiskers and smell and temper and queer idears—yes, and brown-haired widows, too. You made a natural mistake."

"I didn't make no mistake," Boots said stubbornly. "I know now that I seen Dad Huber, and for some reason he was skeered to face up with me. Me—his best friend here! I can't get Sam Figgert int'rested and them K.C. detectives say no crime was committed there. I want to run this trail out, Pa. I want to take some time off and mebbe spend a little money and smell this thing out."

"You a-gettin' that gold fever again, boy?" Duff said. Boots said he honestly didn't know. "Well, go to it. Only way you'll get it outen your system, boy."

He hired a man to replace Boots, and Boots drew a few hundred dollars from the bank and went back to Kansas City. He stayed there three months without writing. Next Duff heard from him in Portland, Oregon. He was broke and wanted another three hundred and just one more chance. Just one more! If it petered out he'd come home.

Duff sent the money, on the strength of that promise.

NOW to go back a little.

Dad wasn't as old as he looked when he moved those three hundred sheep into Schoolhouse Canyon. He was fifty-three or -four, he had forgotten which. He had lost two toes in Alaska, hunting gold, and had learned to hate and fear winter weather, which was all he got out of the trip. He had prospected all over Nevada. After Alaska he went down to South America and caught malaria. When he got back from there, he knew what he wanted to do.

Old Dad Huber was through with gold. It was the sheepman's life for him. He had learned to need solitude. Now he wanted peace, too. And a climate that wasn't too hot and too cold. Mountains, say, where a man could move up and down, against the grain of the weather.

He worked one year in Wyoming, to learn the business. He came on to Idaho then, drifting south from there. He knew sheep pretty well by then. He bought a

small flock of old ewes for two-seventy a head and drove them down to railroad, fattening them as he went. He shipped them to Los Angeles and sold them for enough to buy fifty breeding ewes. With these, and one blooded Southdown buck, he headed for the hills.

His flock numbered three hundred by the time he found exactly the place he wanted to live out his days—in Schoolhouse Canyon, off Holcomb Creek.

He got a peculiar joy out of living right on top of a "lost mine," he—who had given up gold-hunting for good. He carried two cartridges in his left hand, and he could pump out an empty and slide in a new one almost as fast as a man could jack a repeater.

He kept the mine-hunters, with their maps and theories and wild eyes, at a distance. He could spot two .32 slugs so close to a man's face he thought he was being shaved for the grave.

This was the life for Dad Huber, walking around with that wonderful hand-made .32 under his arm, his dogs trooping along beside him, his sheep fanned out over the slope. Each day was new and good and different. He liked to wake up in the morning and think what fine thing each day would bring.

Maybe he'd pen up his critters and go lion-hunting. Or maybe he'd sneak the sheep down on the creek for a few hours, for that deep bottom grass. Maybe just set around and doze all day. Maybe that young Pemberly boy would ride over with a pint of whiskey or some onions or a new knife, or something. Maybe one of his dogs would have pups.

Or maybe that Panama pup would give that rackety yowl that meant prowling men around. Dad would grab a handful of slugs and slip outside and let the hunting dogs flush the prowler. Dad would let a .32 slug drift past the end of his nose, to open the debate.

"Now what do you think you want, stranger?" he'd say.

Some brought maps, and some willow-wands to witch out the cache. Some just brought a hungry look. All offered to share with Dad if he'd call off his dogs. At this, Dad would level the gun.

"Git!"

And if they didn't, Dad would say,

"Take him out, Panama," and the big pup would shoot forward silently. The prowler would git, then, and Dad would whistle back the pup.

Only one man ever came back after this reception.

This one was a young fellow who had worked for the Showalter spread a year or two previously. He first appeared one day about sunup. Dad heard the Panama pup racketing. He rolled out of his bunk and slid into his *huaraches*—Mexican moccasins—and went out of the door like a streak, grabbing up the .32 as he ran.

THE fellow had climbed on top of Dad's rock fence and was standing off the dogs with a club, which was all right with the dogs so long as he treed and stayed treed. He had on a .45 gun and a whole beltful of shells. Dad leveled the .32.

"Call off your dogs before I blow their heads off, Old Timer," the youngster yelled.

"You just try that!" Dad yelled back.

The kid's hand drifted toward the .45, but Dad let him smell one from the .32, and the hand came away.

"Ah, cut it out, Dad. You know me! I'm Goldie Stafford—I used to work for Les Showalter. Put down your gun and call off your dogs. I got a juicy proposition for you."

"I got one for you, too," Dad said steadily. "You turn around and head out of here. If you worked for Showalter you know I give my word I'd keep out trespassers."

The kid was shifty-looking, but he had nerve. He was cool.

"Let's talk it over, Dad," he coaxed. "I scouted this canyon before you ever showed up here—on Showalter's time, the damned old fool. I can lay my hands on that dust in ten hours, *because I already know where it is!* I'll split fifty—"

Dad lifted the youth's hat and jacked in another cartridge. The kid felt some of his blond hair go off with the hat. He tumbled backward off the fence.

He came up on the other side, shooting over the rocks with the .45. He was a good shot. His first slug knocked Dad over. It just creased his side, but he yelled and went down, and Panama went over the wall with the other dogs after him.

The kid got two more shots away. One of them drilled the Panama pup between the eyes.

The other went into the ground, because the dogs were on him and would have torn him to pieces except that Dad's shrill whistle brought them off. Dad had seen his arm go up over the wall and lose the .45.

By then Dad knew he wasn't killed. He took his rifle and hobbled over and told the Stafford kid to get up and go. Goldie was cut up around the face and arms, but he'd live.

Dad knelt over Panama and picked the big dog's body up in his left arm. He had thought a lot of that pup, and he hadn't even been able to breed to it—Panama was gone and had left no sons or hopes of sons. He jerked the rifle toward the kid.

"Git!"

"I'm bleedin' bad, Pop," the kid argued. "You can't send me away in this shape."

"Hell I can't," Dad choked. "Look what you done to my pup. Git, or by the Eternal I'll bury you under my dog!"

The kid got, dripping blood. Dad felt pretty weak, but he got to the house and put a salt-and-flour paste on his wound, and tied it up. He went out and opened the gate and turned his sheep out to feed. They grazed until noon.

He brought them inside again, and then went out and picked up the pup's body, to take up the canyon for burial. It was the first of his dogs to die, but he had already picked out a likely graveyard.

He got the dog part of the way up the canyon before his strength gave out. He was a tough old man but he had been scored by a .45. The next morning he was a little feverish. He couldn't think of anything but that poor dead pup. He left the sheep inside and returned to the dog's body, and carried it up the canyon a ways, with the lion dogs following.

As he passed the poison-oak patch, one of the hounds began baying. The whole pack scrambled up the opposite slope. Dad forgot he was wounded and started after them, caning along with the gun.

Near the top, he saw an old she-lion take to the trees, in no hurry to leave the country. Dad knelt down and shot her through the head. He hobbled over and

cut off her ears, for the cowmen paid fifty cents an ear. Just then the dogs, which had backtrailed for the fun of it, bayed trail again.

THIS time it was a half-grown kitten that appeared out of nowhere. It got away before Dad could get a shot at it. He let the dogs drive it off into the trees. Somehow, he just didn't feel like going after that one.

He started back down the slope.

He was halfway down when a huge boulder, a five hundred pounder, lumbered past him. He knew that stone and where it had lain, and it was so wrong that he spun over on his back and brought the .32 up.

He got a glimpse of Goldie Stafford, just as the shifty-eyed kid dodged back. Dad whistled for the dogs, but they were too deep into the timber to hear him. He let himself down an inch at a time, keeping the rifle ready. He did not see Goldie again.

He hid in the brush until the dogs came frolicking back. The sheep dogs down at the cabin started barking. He jumped up and hobbled toward the cabin, the lion dogs streaming ahead. When he got there he went through the cabin, laughing delightedly.

The kid had risked everything to come in and steal his own gun, which Dad had thoughtfully kept the day before. In an act equally thoughtful, Dad had filed off the firing pin. That was why he laughed.

He slept out in the brush that night, and the next morning his fever was worse. He knew the sheep needed attention but he felt he owed Panama more.

He got back to the pup's body, and again the dogs started another lion. It was a cub, a long-legged yearling as fleet as a race-horse. It took to the trees, and he shot it and took its ears, keeping his eye out for Goldie Stafford.

"They're denned up here somewhere, right under my nose," he mused. "Have to find it and dig it out. Old gal I shot yestiddy has had a batch of kittens in that same hole every spring. One of the kittens will take over the den now. Well—"

He felt so bad he could do nothing but go home. He put a fat bacon poultice on his wound, to draw the puss, and let his

sheep out to water and grass that afternoon. And the next morning, thanks to letting the wound fester, thanks to putting the bacon on at the right time, he was much better.

He headed back toward the pup's body and the poison oak patch, the dogs at his heels, the rifle under his arm. Halfway there, one of the hounds fell down and started twitching and yelping and spitting green froth.

Dad knew dog poison when he saw it. He went kind of crazy. He had to stand there and watch the dog die, because with Goldie Stafford so close by he feared to risk a shot. In ten minutes he had three dead dogs. He found small bits of poisoned meat everywhere.

Then he heard a noise up the canyon—a rumble and roar, as if several pounds of black grain powder had been touched off.

He started up the canyon on a dead run, forgetting he had a sore side.

He found Goldie digging away across the canyon from the oak patch. Dad came up quietly and rammed the rifle muzzle in the kid's back. The kid yelled and dived for the crippled .45. Dad grinned and poked him with the .32 again.

"Go ahead and pull the trigger, you yella dog-pizener!" he taunted. "I filed off the firin' pin. Now what—"

He got no farther. The kid lost his head. He came at Dad with the useless .45 upraised. Dad hit him over the temple with the barrel of the rifle. The kid went to his knees, and Dad grabbed the .45. The kid went for a knife in his pocket, and Dad brought the .45 down as hard as he could. He had to hit only once. He heard the bone crack under the trigger guard. Stafford went over on his side, and Dad stood up panting.

"Have to bury him," he muttered. "He was a-blastin' out the side of the slope here. I'll just spade him under his own dirt. Plant the dogs he pizened with him. Serve him right!"

He got the kid's body up into the hole and was shaping the dirt walls down when his shovel went right through. He got a gust of fetid, lion-smelling air and knew at once where the old lioness and the kittens had been denned up. He opened the hole a little more and peered inside.

Less than a foot away was a little wall

of rocks, square pieces carefully laid not by Nature, but by the hand of a man. Beyond the wall he could see the remains of two rusty tomato cans, and the shreds of some old leather pouches. All were covered with tarnished, gray-green flecks of metal.

He knew now how clever the old Dutchman had been. He knew now that it hadn't been just a small pocket. He forgot all about his sore side and gathered the gold into his cupped hands.

BOOTS PEMBERLY found him living in a Seattle hotel. The old man sighed and smiled, almost with relief, when Boots walked in. The kid had a .38 revolver in his coat pocket. He took it out and laid it on the table.

"The gold. How much was there?" he whispered. Boots was trembling.

"Nigh forty thousand. I knowed you'd ketch up with me. I knowed you reckanized me back there in K.C.," Dad said, in a tremulous voice. "I knowed you'd foller me, bein' the kinda kid you are. I aimed to marry that Mrs. Fenske, but you skeered me off. Now mebbe I kin have peace at last. It's been hell, son."

Boots said, "Tell me about it," choking a little.

Dad told him about it, keeping back nothing.

"I was better off as a sheep man. I was happier. But a man cain't go back," he finished. "My dogs is dead. I let my sheep scatter. I didn't even get no use out of the gold, because I lost that there brown-haired woman. There'll be no peace for me anywhere now, son. You take what's left of the money."

Boots stood up.

"Forget it, Dad," he said. "The main thing about gold is to find it. You did that. The Dutchman's ghost is laid for good now. If I was you, I'd go back to K.C. and marry that woman and get some benefit out of that gold—because I sure ain't interested in it any more. What do you say, Dad?"

Old Dad Huber nearly cried.

Boots rode into his home, after a long absence for an only son, just as the Pemberlys were sitting down to supper. They were not a family to kiss and shake hands. Old Duff's face lighted up and he pointed to a chair, while Mrs. Pemberly went to set another plate. Boots sat down.

"Howdy, Pa. I see you painted the pump house," he said. "Looks good."

"Howdy, son," Duff said. "Yeah, thought I'd paint it white. Did you find the old sheepman, or was it a mistake?"

"You was right, Pa," Duff answered. "I made a mistake. It must of been somebody else I seen in K.C."



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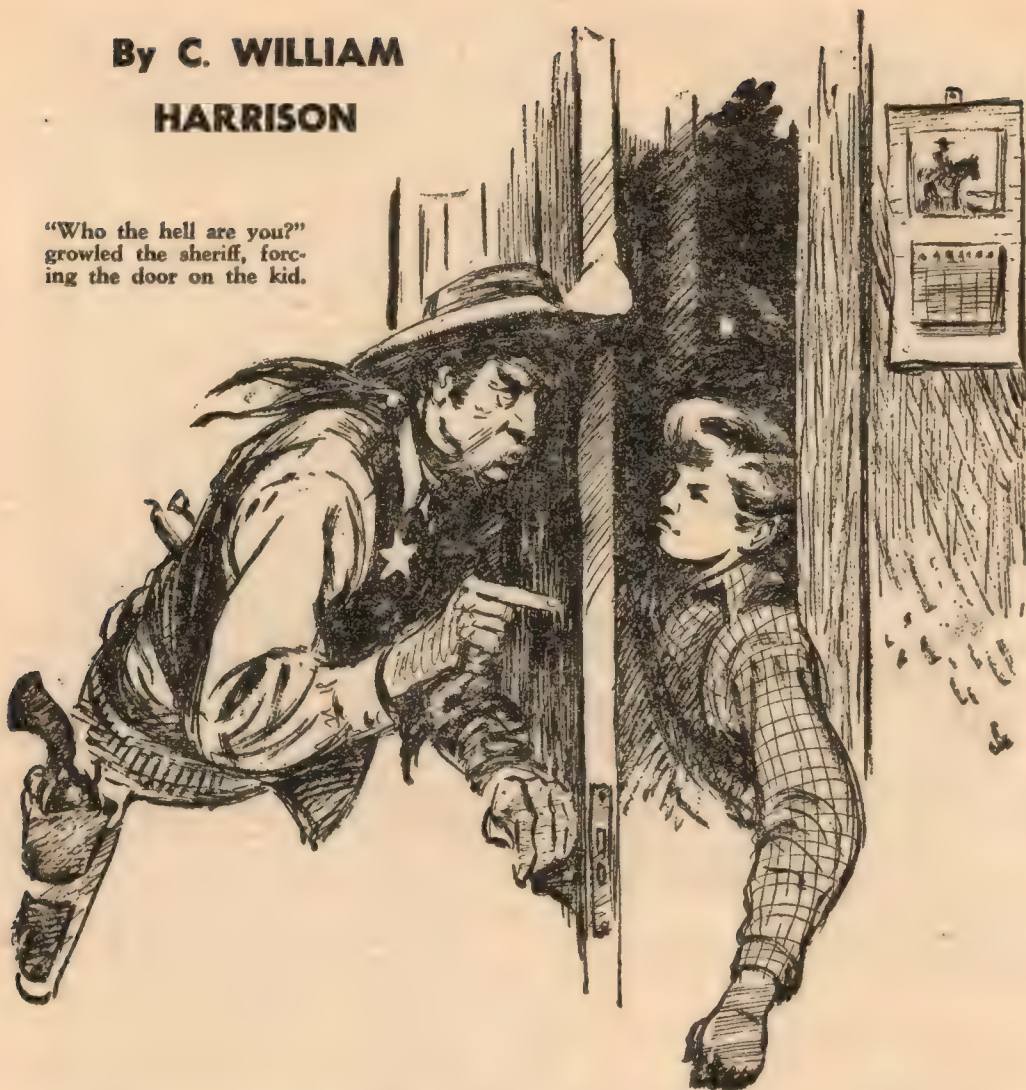
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By C. WILLIAM
HARRISON

"Who the hell are you?"
growled the sheriff, forc-
ing the door on the kid.



TIME was when Roger Dosse might have shuddered at this thing he was about to do. When the thought had first come to him, tiptoeing stealthily into his mind, it had squeezed and turned his stomach with unbelieving horror. The impulse to kill had been a stranger to Roger Dosse at the beginning—an unwanted stranger.

*When Roger Dosse rigged up
a cold-deck gun-trap, he knew
full well that death would
beat a trail to his own lonely
frontier shack. . . .*

A Better Gun-Trap

But the impulse to do murder had found a home in the mind of Roger Dosse, and now after more than two years it was no longer a stranger. It walked through the many secret rooms of Roger's mind, and it talked to him with sly confidence. And when it talked, Roger smiled at the murder he was about to commit, and said, "Sure. Sure, why not?"

The hole was in the floor where he had bored it. It was a small hole, no more than a quarter of an inch in diameter, and as he bent to it he wondered once again if there was any danger in what he was going to do.

But no, there couldn't be. The impulse to kill had lived with him for more than two years, and during that time it had slyly showed him all the risks involved and how to avoid them.

He was going to kill a man, that was true, but the method he was going to use could never be called premeditated murder. It would be an accident, a regrettable and tragic thing to happen, but nevertheless an accident. The law could never say that it had been anything but an unfortunate happenstance that had sent the bullet ripping through the planks of the floor and into the body of an old man that Roger could not possibly have seen.

Roger bent to the floor and through the small hole he could see John Curhan seated in the cabin's lower room. The old man was in his usual chair, and the chair was in its usual position, directly under Roger's eye. That was what would make this so easy—old John Curhan's undeviating habits. You added an old man's string of habits just like you added a column of figures, and you always got the correct answer. A careful man never made a mistake.

Roger Dosse straightened, and glanced briefly at his gun cabinet. There was a rack for the rifles, polished modern pieces and ancient heavy-bore guns that had found their use on the old frontiers of early California and the western Territories. A smaller case held the pistols, derringers and heavy belt guns as long as a man's forearm, old frontier guns that had killed—and one weapon that would kill again.

Roger Dosse reached out and picked up the Colt. It was a single-action .45, with a

steer's head carved in ivory. He opened the loading gate and revolved the cylinder. There were five cartridges in the gun, with one empty chamber for the gun's hammer to rest on. Roger slipped another bullet into the empty chamber, and set the heavy gun aside.

He went down stairs, considered pouring himself a drink and then decided against it. He didn't need a drink to do what he was going to do. His nerves were steady, and he needed no liquid courage to carry this through.

HE went into the living room. He grinned and nodded at the old man in the chair, and at a thought turned to the side window. The night was black outside, with fog beginning to roll in from the Mojave on a strengthening wind. He looked up the mountain slope, through the pines, toward the Hubbard cabin. A light was on up there, in one of the cabin's lower rooms, but that was all right.

John Curhan looked up from his book and asked, "Are you going out tonight, Rog?"

"I'd thought about it. But there's a fog coming in, and fog is something I can do without."

He stood there looking at the window, looking up the slope at the Hubbard cabin. He regretted that he had not remembered to check the Hubbard cabin the night he had bored the hole through the floor directly above Curhan's chair. It was the regret of a man whose orderly mind demanded completeness in everything he did. It bothered him to realize he had neglected to check the Hubbard cabin that night.

It bothered him, but not with anxiety. Mrs. Hubbard was a big-boned Amazon of a woman, with a nagging, gossip-hungry tongue. And prying eyes. Still there was but little chance that she had seen him bore that hole in the floor of his room. And if she had, it would have meant nothing to her. He had returned the brace and bit to her husband immediately, and that would have closed any interest she might have had in the matter.

Roger turned away from the window and picked up the telephone. He asked the operator for Jeff Lasher, and felt the resentful strike of John Curhan's eyes.

"I don't see what you like about that

fellow, Roger. As a town marshal, he's about as handy as a broken thumb. He never has anything to say, and if he's got brains he's never used them."

Roger smiled. "He likes guns. I've got a new one to show him."

Waiting for his connection, Roger glanced at the knotty pine walls, at the broad windows and the handhewn timbers in the open ceiling. The absence of any covering over the rafters was what had made his plan so simple. A hole through the floor of the room above had given him a clear view into the room.

It was a cabin that gave a rustic appearance with its huge stone fireplace and in-laid floors, but it had all the ease and comfort of a valley home. Here in this San Bernardino mountain resort, such a cabin was worth twenty thousand dollars.

And the general store which Dosse and Curhan owned in partnership would bring another thirty thousand. Roger smiled, pleased with the profits of this night's work.

A voice came through the telephone, and Roger said, "Is that you, Jeff? There's something I—" And as he had planned he changed that abruptly. "Wait just a minute, will you?"

He turned his head, knowing that Lasher would still hear his voice. "It's about time for your medicine, isn't it, John?"

John Curhan raised querulous eyes. "Not for five minutes yet."

Roger smiled, said pleasantly, "What was the name of that new mystery novel you asked me about the other day? *Lament Me Not*, wasn't it? It came in today, and I brought a copy home with me. I'll get it for you in just a minute."

He brought the telephone closer to his mouth, ignoring the irritable puzzlement in John Curhan's eyes.

He said, "If you're not busy, how about dropping over here, Jeff? I've got a new gun to show you. Uh-huh, it's that old Colt that's supposed to have belonged to Bat Masterson. Fine, Jeff. I'll be seeing you, then."

HE put down the telephone, crossed the room, and went up the stairs. He picked up the heavy revolver, glanced again through the small hole in the floor. He thumbed back the hammer, placed the

muzzle squarely over the hole, and held the barrel perpendicular to the floor. He pulled the trigger.

The bullet ripped through the floor, and splintered the wood where the small hole had been bored.

The bullet sped on and crashed, just as Roger had known it would, through the top of John Curhan's head.

Jeff Lasher was a tight-mouthed uncommunicative man. He was tall and lank and bony, with sun-squinted eyes and the rough, weathered skin of a mountain man. He was a man who liked to listen. He seldom talked, and silence held him as he looked at John Curhan's dead body. He loaded his pipe and forgot to light it. He shook his head slowly.

"This is tough, Rog."

Reaction was having its way with Dosse, making him sick with a feeling of unbelieving shock at what he had done. The planning had been easy, and it had been easy to pull the trigger, but it was hard to stand here and look at what he had done.

Still that was how he had known it would be. He had killed a man; he didn't deny it. So it was natural that his face would show the stunned sickness of horror.

"Tough on you, Rog," Jeff Lasher said. "It wouldn't be so bad if you hadn't liked the old man so much. And you bein' the one who killed him—"

"My God, Jeff!"

"Take it easy, Rog. You got no reason to blame yourself too much." Lasher looked up at the varnished planks that were the ceiling of this room and the floor of the room above. He stared at the splintered hole directly above the dead man, and shook his head again.

"You should have known better than to leave that gun hammer setting on a live bullet, Rog."

"I know it, Jeff. My God, I know that now! I've never dropped a gun before, but this time. . . ."

"Sure—sure." Lasher squinted at the planks overhead, and moved his bony shoulders. "Them boards are tight, all right. If there was any cracks between them so's a man could see through into this room there might be someone who'd say you killed Curhan on purpose. His death will give you his share of this prop-

erty and the store, and that adds up to a lot of money."

Dosse stared at the town marshal, and said nothing.

"As it is, them boards are tight and you couldn't see through," Lasher said in his meager voice. "So you dropped the gun, it went off and killed the old man. A plain accident is what this is. That's all. Just an accident."

There was a timid rapping on the door. Lasher crossed the room and opened the door, and there stood young Billy Hubbard. The boy's hands were behind his back, and his bright eyes were drawn instantly to the body in the chair.

He said, "Hey!" and his widened eyes snapped to Dosse and Jeff Lasher. "Hey, old Curhan—he's dead, ain't he?"

The town marshal made a gesture with his hand. "Get along, son." He started to close the door.

The boy said excitedly, "Mom said she thought she heard a shot down here. She sent me down here to find out if anything happened, and when I tell her it was old Curhan killed. Gee, he is dead, ain't he?"

Lasher's tone sharpened. "I told you to go home, Billy. Beat it, I said!"

He pushed the door again, trying to close it, and the boy cried out shrilly. "Hey, will you wait just a minute, Mr. Lasher."

THE boy thrust his hand through the narrowing opening, and Roger Dosse stared at it. He stared with unbelieving horror at the small thin hand and at the brace and bit it held. Lasher pulled the door open again, and the boy's eyes were wide and intent.

"Mom said you didn't need to have ought to bring this back the other day, Mr. Dosse. She said pop borrowed this from you several months ago, and you didn't need to of brought it back after you got it the other day. This belongs to you, Mr. Dosse."

Roger Dosse opened his mouth, but he could find nothing to say. He closed his mouth, and his throat was suddenly parched.

The boy's eyes were as bright and insistent, as sharply prying as his mother's. "Mom is wondering why you got this brace and bit, Mr. Dosse. She's wondering why you went and bored that hole in your floor like she seen you do the other night. Hey, Mr. Dosse? Hey, wait. I just want to—"

Jeff Lasher closed the door then. He closed the door firmly, turned, and looked steadily at Roger Dosse. He stared at him and shook his head.

"Tough," he said. "I guess this is going to be mighty tough on you, Rog. Tougher than it was for old Curhan."



TRAIL HERD OF DOOM

"Maybe I'm yellow," Luten told the girl. "I fought alone against Faurot's B-H five years, and now I'm through, I'm beat." But the girl taught him that no real man was beaten until he was dead . . . and Faurot taught them both on that heat-blasted, waterless trail drive through hell, that there were a thousand slow ways of dying. . . .

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The Indians came alive on the rim, and dust spurted up.

Chapter I

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S BLOOD!

THE WAGON TRAIN stretched for more than a mile along the north bank of the river, the billows of dust hanging over it like slow clouds of fire in the dead-hush spell of late September. The dying sun was an eye of blood on the tips of the tall hills to the west.

There were more than one hundred and

A Novel

By **TOM ROAN**



Sixty Wagons Loaded With Death!

twenty of those canvas-covered shapes back there. Among them were giant old Conestoga freighters, tall prairie schooners, and plain but strong country wagons, hand-fashioned in cross-road blacksmith shops.

Each of the latter had been given an extra long coupling tongue. Each had had its bed lengthened and widened. The bent bows of white-oak and white canvas tops had been added. Inside them were all the worldly goods of the travelers who owned them—everybody heading for the big, grand, wild and free but dangerous land men called Montana Territory in the early 1870's.

It had been a splendid train, full of hope and promise, back at the jump-off in Independence, Missouri. But days on the trail and miles in places without the sign of a rut had done things to Tim O'Toole's train. The usual bickering and nagging had set in as soon as the country had grown rough, the grass scarce, the danger from Indians more. Now everything seemed weary and lifeless as O'Toole sat his tall white thoroughbred horse on a knoll a mile ahead of the leading wagon, staring ahead with a scowl.

Grass and water had been good for three days now, yet the long yokes of oxen ahead of each wagon appeared to weave in their lines. Horses were tired and thin, even the faces of the would-be settlers drawn by countless worries. There had been grumbling and quarreling ever since they had left the Badlands to their east and had pushed as straight as the hills and waterways would allow them to go to reach Montana.

Many men and women had declared that it was only humane to stop here and give the worn-out stock a chance to put on a little more muscle in this God-send of water and grass. Big Tim O'Toole had been a hard and head-strong man, not given to taking orders from man or woman. Only this morning just at sunrise he had mounted his horse and had it out with a score of them.

"And, faith, it will be the same tomorrow!" he had told them, bluntly. "Once I make my mind I stick to it, right or wrong! And if I be wrong and know I'm wrong, then, by the devil's shadow, I still will not change. 'Twas my mother's way,

and I stick to it. If any man doesn't like it, then let him come forward and fight."

"Fight, aye!" Lean old Jerry Dooley, garbed in shabby homespun jeans, had stepped forward. "'Tis too much of the wrong kind of Irish in ye, Captain Tim. I hail from County Cork meself, an' I know the part ye come from, gettin' away from it because this country held more for ye in one year than ye could find over there in six. An' mind ye this!" He had pointed a wagging finger. "'Tis not yer mother who's runnin' America, an' we want no way of life we left crammed down our throats. Go back to it if ye want it, after turning yer back on it."

A younger man would have been knocked sprawling and had the belly kicked out of him on the spot. Jerry Dooley was too old to fight like that. There were six-shooters at his hips, a ten-inch knife swinging down his belly from a small chain around his neck. He had been out here in this wild country twice before, a man who knew how to fight with gun and knife—and damn the fist and skull.

NO other man had stepped forward and lifted his voice, and yet there were many who were itching for a tangle of brawn and blood with this near-giant. Tim O'Toole knew it but he could not back-track. Not many—not too many—had liked him within a couple of weeks after the jump-off. A man in his mid-forties, he was too big, dark and blustering, quickly developing the habit of shouting or lion-roaring his orders to men no more than a dozen feet away.

His arms hung on him like those of some great, hairy ape. His hands looked twice the size of an ordinary man's. Hard work and howling seemed to have been his lot since childhood. He was in the habit of speaking out of turn, bursting in on subjects he knew nothing at all about. He tried to tell women how to cook, often this or that he had never seen or tasted.

A little authority seemed to have gone completely to his head. In spells when he tried to be friendly, full of laughs and his idea of jokes, he only made a mess of it. Unlike old man Dooley, he could not make a most simple-sounding remark and instantly hear people laughing all around him.

Tim O'Toole was a misfit as the captain of a westbound wagon train, but he was never the man to admit it. An admission would have been a sign of weakness. The iron hand was his rule. He had been out here before, as far as the Upper Missouri—and he knew it all, far more than men who had led a dozen wagon trains stirring in this wild country.

The sound of hoofbeats to northward now turned him quickly in his saddle. At once his dark tangle of bushy brows kinked into lumps again, smoky-dark eyes becoming as hard as bullets, his entire face a deepening scowl, the old suspicious devil stirring in his blood.

The man in the distance was far younger, not much more than half his age. Mounted on a tall horse that looked golden in the dying sunlight, silver mane and tail whipping, he was garbed in yellow buckskins, beaded with Indian finery and fringed from trouser leg to sleeve. Around him rode a pair of heavy cartridge belts, a six-shooter at each hip, the long knife of the plainsman swinging against his stomach, big white hat topping his curly brown head.

Johnny Killane had been a victim of Big Tim O'Toole's growing malice from the first time he had seen him. Killane had been born in a big covered wagon camped one night in the Comanche country of Texas, the Indians all around, a battle roaring. He had been over all the trails. Big Tim had believed little of it. He did not believe that this slick-faced youth was twenty-four as he claimed, and had rated him at nearer twenty—or even eighteen.

Killane had been soundly labeled as a smart-Alec from the start. He was just too damned smart. Claiming now to be on his way to a far-flung trading post high on the Ruby River, right in the middle of some of the toughest Indian country, he rode a Mexican saddle that was worth at least five hundred.

His silvered and ivory-buffed long six-shooters, some one had said, were worth three hundred. The rifle he always carried under his left leg on the saddle had cost too much money for the average man to even think of owning.

There was something soundly dishonest about this Johnny Killane. It had come to Big Tim O'Toole at once, settling itself

firmly in a mind that rarely changed an opinion. It had grown immensely back there just out of Independence when a tall, bright-haired, blue-eyed girl had entered the picture as the daughter of Eldon Parker and his wife. Parker had intended to take up land somewhere along the Yellowstone.

Andree Parker had made the eyes of many men come back to sparkles instead of staring listlessness. With the women it had been different. Many had lifted their brows knowingly and humped their backs, outwardly shocked at such carryin's-on, inwardly seething with jealousy. Andree Parker could handle a six-shooter or a rifle with the best of the men in the train.

She rode her tall, high-bred black gelding as a superb horsewoman, and upset tradition as she rode, in a manner that was downright scandalous to the general run. In divided skirts and bright jackets she rode astride, half the time on her feet in the stirrups, body tilted forward, girl and horse splitting the wind like a Texas cowboy trying to keep ahead of a stampeding herd.

The side-saddle, dinky peanut hats and long, voluminous skirts of the traditional English riding habit were the things for a lady. Not shortened skirts and a man's big, brutal-looking cowboy saddle. Some offered their opinions openly, brazenly damning the girl as wantonly unrighteous—and surely bound for no other good than hell-fire and brimstone!

At first, Tim O'Toole had been shocked to the bone to see such a girl ride like that. Riding astride was not done by a white woman. Only Indian squaws were bold enough for that. And yet in a couple of days he had found himself getting used to it, and willing to forget a lot of the things the girl might do.

He had never lion-roared at her father, had always been full of his best smiles and supposedly witty sayings around her. Then—damn of the damned!—Johnny Killane had come to join the train as one of the late arrivals one night at sunset.

Not once had it occurred to Big Tim O'Toole that the green-eyed monster of jealousy was riding hard on his vitals. He would not have admitted it even if it had occurred to him. Jealousy was a wrong, a

sin, a weakness. He had no weaknesses. And even now he did not realize exactly why anger stirred through him at the sight of that galloping rider coming up.

"Good afternoon, Captain O'Toole!" Killane was always respectful and touched the brim of his big hat as a salute. "I'm afraid I'll have to warn you again that—well, it looks like near-trouble ahead."

"Trouble, aye?" O'Toole's smile was an ill-hidden leer. "What's this damned scare you're trying to bring on now, Killane? Last night you had half the train in a devilish nervous shiver by telling certain ones there were Indians watching us. Let me tell you now—and I'm a man of my word—I want no more of that business from *you!*"

"What I said was true." A steely blue glint had come into the younger man's eyes. "I told you they were watching us three days ago. You laughed at me then, and even hinted that I was a fool. I didn't like it then, and don't like it now, but there are women and children in that train."

"But," he shrugged, "we can pass that by. If you'll take a look at what I see." He turned in his saddle and pointed to a high break between two tall peaks, up there where the red sun seemed lodged in the pass. "I told you yesterday I saw smoke signals. They're much closer now, up there between us and the sun. The white man rarely dares to look directly in the sun. The Indians know this, and take full advantage of it."

"Damn it, what is up there?" The wagon train captain was up in his stirrups and leaning forward, both hands on the saddle horn for support. "I—I do seem to see something."

"Smoke signals again," nodded Killane. "If I've forgotten none of the signs—and remember I was born out here and grew up among the reds—those signals mean, in a white man's language, 'Assembly tonight at the given place.' It may be for only a big powwow. It can mean an attack before dawn, and that means blood, women screaming, children crying, good men dying. If I dare, I might say that we'd better camp before dark tonight."

"It's my business to say when and where," leered O'Toole. "I know how to take care of it, Killane."

"Yes, I see that you do." Killane's smile had grown hard and full of bitterness. "Were you ever in a real Indian fight, O'Toole?"

"And what difference would it make to you?" O'Toole's eyes widened. "I need none of your—uh—help, Killane."

"Yes, I see that." For a second it looked as if Killane was about to laugh outright. "When I told you about the signals yesterday you clipped me short, as you do about everything that goes on, whether you know a damned thing about it or not."

"You're thick, O'Toole!" The young man was sizzling powder ready to explode. "Just thick, arrogant and damned ignorant! You may think you're big, always trying to cram your overbearing ideas down everybody's throat, but I'm not going to see women and children murdered and scalped for a thick-head like you."

"Are ye trying to say that to me?" lion-roared the train captain, twisting his face to look his worst. "To me, Tim O'Toole?"

"No, damn you!" snapped back Killane, touching a spur to his golden horse. "I've just got through saying it. Now go to hell!"

"I—I'll have you put out of the train for this." O'Toole yelled that after Killane had ridden on past him and was letting his spirited horse break into a canter.

"I'm in charge here! When I'm in charge of a thing, by God, *I'm in charge!*" He hit the wide, flat horn of his saddle with the ball of his fist, a man gone mad at the world. "I give all orders and I take back none!"

Killane simply rode on, paying no more attention to him.

Chapter II

FORTY HELLS TO FIGHT

"**HIM!**" Jerry Dooley spat contemptuously when Killane swung to his left at the head of the train. "Downright speakin', I ain't never said he was crazy. I just once said he ain't got no brains, no sense! He don't like me, and," he grinned, perfectly cool now, "he don't like ye, my boy, for the same reason. We speak our minds."

"I had to argue my head off to get him to put ye in charge of the scouts. At the start he wouldn't think of it. Then I dropped a hint. I said it would keep ye away from the train. The big idea jumped through his head. That's why he has been trying to drive ye night and day—keeping ye away from a certain campfire.

"Big Tim doesn't want ye out riding with a certain girl, son. He's just iron-headed enough to think he might have a better chance 'imself. And what would a fine filly want with a grizzly like him? She knows his roar. She'd savvy his bite in no time. He'd have her slaving for him like an ox, on the go before dawn and to late at night. That's what his kind thinks a woman's for—no more, no less.

"But the Indians now, that's something else!" He whipped back his old shoulders. "We're in the dangerous Cheyenne country now, as ye full well know, me lad, and they have many reasons to hate the palefaces flocking into their country. They didn't like it more'n thirty years ago when I made my first trip out. Today they like it less and less, and the bloody and dangerous Sioux are siding with them."

Indians were always in the thoughts of a traveler. The tall hills were all around, deep canyons and dark gorges everywhere. They were ideal places for a war-party to lie in wait. Scouts were on the high places. If an attack was coming the chief knew the full-fighting strength of the train, the types of guns they would have to face, the mettle of the men and women they were to engage.

Supposedly friendly Indians had been drifting past the train, almost every Sunday for the past five or six weeks. Sunday was the one day Big Tim O'Toole would not allow a wheel to turn. Last Sunday there had been eight redskins in the ragged mess that had turned up—three filthy old bucks and five bent squaws.

As usual with such hopeless wanderers, too aged and worn to follow their ever-shifting, fast-moving tribes, they had come begging for food and scraps of clothing. Killane and Dooley and a few other old-timers had seen to it that they were fed and a few pieces of worn clothing handed out. They had been sent on their way with enough meat and corn to last them four or five days.

Killane, as everybody had noticed, talked their language. He had given two of the old bucks powder and shot for their flintlock muskets, and that had brought the roar of the lion from the ever-watching O'Toole.

"'Tis as good as murder! Our clothes and good buffalo meat is not enough. You give them ammunition! My God, man, don't you know you might as well be a gun-runner?"

"Gun-runner, aye!" Dooley had snorted, "A couple of small bags of gunpowder and two gourds of shot to kill feathered game along the river and keep starvation off their throats.

"Look now. The Indians who fight would take to the bow and arrow a dozen times ahead of such guns. Aye, to the long lance, itself. They want rifles these days—good rifles. Many are falling into their hands and many of them better than our guns, Mr O'Toole!"

"But you know they're only spies!" O'Toole bellowed. "Any man with a scrap of brain in his head would know that at once."

"**M**AYBE they are, maybe they're not," Killane frowned. "If they are spies, they've seen all there is to see. I doubt the spying idea. They've been as good as deserted by their own tribes, left to wander and starve, to die in caves and holes in the rocks. The younger Indians don't trust them, and generally get their information from bucks among their fighting hordes. They know the old have a hatchet to grind."

"But the old would still sell soul and gut for a couple of pounds of jerked buffalo."

"An' so would ye, ye Roscommoner!" The Irish started to boil in Jerry Dooley. "Aye, if gut and soul and heart all ached with hunger!"

"A man from County Cork, aye," O'Toole lion-roared, "Never a Roscommon man, I'll have you know!"

"Niver a Roscommon ape, ye say?" Dooley leered back. "Faith, no, and I would break me neck to take it all back—if he knew where there was a hog, a sheep, or a goose to steal."

It would have been a fight if Killane had not been there to cool them down. He

could handle old Jerry Dooley. Others had to drag O'Toole away.

"'Tis only a child he is!" the old man had grinned. "Not yet grown up in the head. How I love to make him howl!"

But now the old man was grim, eyes troubled as they searched the hills and mountains towering up ahead. Suddenly he flung out his right hand and caught Killane by the wrist.

"The devil 'imself is coming now, Johnny. And he's mad! After telling him what you did ye may have to fight 'im!"

O'Toole sat there brooding, thinking his thoughts, his temper rising. Now he swung back off the rise, coming as fast as the tall horse could run—always a sign he was ready to eat the devil blood-raw. When he came up thirty feet away from Killane and the old man, he slammed the horse to a halt so quickly the animal's rump almost hit the ground.

"I warned you before, Killane." He let that come ripping out. "I want no more of your bloody scare-making, and not when it comes to a few clouds in the sky. You've told Dooley and his loose lip will find a way to do the rest. I want you out of this train. Being a man of my word, I want you out in the next few minutes—or I'll pick you up by the neck and throw you out."

"Sometimes a man can go too far." Killane was suddenly out of his saddle. Wagons ahead and behind began to halt. "I think you'd better start taking me by the neck right now."

"Defy me, will ye now?" The train captain was out of his saddle, throwing his reins to the ground. "I'll beat you to death!"

"Wait!" A girl's voice screamed out. "Why must words come to this terrible thing?"

"Watch 'im, Johnny, me lad," warned Dooley. "He's bent for murder."

ANDREE PARKER was coming up on her high-bred black, but there was no time for Killane to step back. Behind her trailed her father—a long, thin man garbed in dead-black and mounted on a tall sorrel.

"Stop, men, stop!" The preacher's voice was a wail. "My God, you must not stoop to this thing of fighting."

"Ye never tried to stop O'Toole before," cried old Jerry Dooley. "Faith, it's time to let him alone now. Beat his head off, Johnny. Just don't let him get his hands on ye, lad!"

O'Toole was coming forward almost in slow-motion. His body set backward, knees bent forward, his face a terrible mask of snarling anger now. The left arm was up, left shoulder forward. The right arm and shoulder were far back, his great maul of hairy-dark fist set to strike with the swiftness of a rattler.

Johnny Killane's hands were up, chest-high. There was no pained strain in his face. He simply stepped forward as if walking into suicide. O'Toole drove up a terrific right fist. Killane rolled his head to one side, let the blow pass. Then he stepped in, delivered a furious right to the nose and mouth. A smashing left followed to the jaw.

O'Toole started back. Before he could right himself another smashing blow had come through, again to the nose and mouth. Spinning around on one heel, the wagon train captain came down, flat on his face in the grass, a kick making his legs straighten out.

"There was no need for that," cried the preacher.

"And why not, Father?" The girl turned in her saddle and faced him. "I'm quite satisfied Captain O'Toole asked for it. Watch him, Johnny. He's getting up!"

"Aye, watch 'im, me boy," nodded Dooley. "'Tis a bull he is, and as a bull ye'll have to fight 'im."

"Stop it!" The preacher hit the ground now. "I command it! Killane, you should be forced to take your belongings and leave the train, and if I have anything to say—"

"Hold it for now!" Old man Dooley hit the ground. "'Tis the second time I've heard Johnny told that. The third time won't come." He flung himself directly in front of the advancing preacher, body going into a crouch, gnarled fists rising. "Come another foot and I'll smear the grass red with ye."

"My foot slipped on the grass." The wagon train captain was up to one foot and knee, left hand on the ground, blood pouring from his broken nose and mouth, forty hells burning in his eyes. "No cheap thief

like that can strike Tim O'Toole and live to see the day when he can boast about it."

"Watch him, Johnny," whispered the girl, ignoring her father. "He's setting himself for a spring, and he looks like a madman!"

Chapter III

SPLIT-UP

BUT O'Toole did not spring at once. He crouched there steadying himself, letting all trace of the blows drain from him. His pride was hurt, to be beat in front of this girl and her father.

No man had ever knocked Big Tim O'Toole off his feet. He had always considered such a thing impossible. Here, a man smaller and lighter than he was had done it. His foot had not slipped on the grass.

"Don't go pushing yer face in it," said old Jerry Dooley behind Johnny Killane. "'Tis not a preacher's job, I'll have ye know."

"I know," gabbled the preacher. "But Killane's brutally assaulted Captain O'Toole. He knocked him down."

"Down—and full-down." Dooley grinned, still holding his fighting pose, ready to step forward. "All the way around, and down on his face, aye! But ye'll keep clear, I tell ye, or the next thing ye'll know ye'll be laying yer Bible on a stone and having to fight yourself."

"I only wanted to stop it, Mr. Dooley," stammered Parker. "I wouldn't want to hurt a hair on no man's head."

"Aye, now, and I know ye tell the truth, parson," agreed the older man. "And I, meself, want to hurt no hair on yer gray-ing head, but I'll be damned and double-damned if that isn't what I'll do if ye don't keep yer place. That monk on the ground called Johnny a cheap thief. The boy has the right to another poke or two at his ugly face."

"I still call him a cheap thief. No fancy button like him could own such a fine horse and fine clothes and guns without stealing the money to buy them. A thief! A thief! A dishonest man, and, faith, that is what I call him!"

"Come on up, Captain O'Toole." Killane was smiling. "I suppose there's only

one thing to do, and that's to finish it. Captain O'Toole, you can apologize and—"

"Apologize!" the man roared, crouched on the ground with a strained wild look in his face. "'Tis something right or wrong I never did for any man—and I never will. Here I come, *thief!*"

He was up like a lion. Killane side-stepped, weaved, swung his head, letting the terrific right fist go by. It was only a shift, a crack as if a dead limb on a tree was suddenly parting in a storm, and the wagon train captain was down again, sprawling all over himself in the grass.

It was not over—not by a long shot. Big Tim O'Toole went down six times in a row, and came up each time. He must have had a constitution of steel. Before he went down for the seventh time he fought like a maniac, driving, slamming, an inch short with one blow, over the head with another.

A bleeding beast at last, he had tried everything, grabbing and holding, trying to throw the younger man off his feet and get him on his back. Killane always managed to come out of it. When the last lightning rush of blows came to an end the larger man was down, sprawled flat on his back, long arms and big fists flung straight out at either side of him.

Killane stepped forward. A man in the hastily gathered crowd called out to him.

"I wouldn't kick 'im while he's down an' clean out, Johnny."

"Don't intend to kick him." Killane forced a quick grin. "I just want to roll him over on his stomach so he won't choke to death on his own blood."

"And why the bother?" old Jerry Dooley asked. "A damned good riddance 'twould me, and many in the crowd will agree—if they'll speak the truth!"

"HERE'S Dr. Pauley," cried a woman suddenly. "Oh, doctor, doctor, what a God-send to have a man of your knowledge in the train with us. Please do something for Captain O'Toole! It looks like those hair-brains," she stabbed a long, thin forefinger at Killane and Dooley, "have almost *murdered* him."

Pauley pushed forward with a professional air. He was short and as round as a barrel and about forty. As if trying to

make a ritual out of it, he spread a big white handkerchief on the ground beside the train captain, and lowered himself to his knees. He was there a long time, poking and feeling around O'Toole's mouth and jaws. Then he spoke:

"Will someone start a fire and get some hot water. This is brutal. Absolutely brutal!" He glanced up at the thick crowd all around him now. "A number of teeth knocked out, possible fractures of the jaw, and—"

"Put all that on the bill," cut in Dooley. "Who cares about it at this time?"

"Beast!" hissed a woman in the crowd. "Truly all *beast!*"

"Come on, both of you!" Andree Parker stepped forward, her black's reins in her hand. She took Killane and Dooley by the arms. "Let the doctor take care of the rest of it. The doctor," she added with a mirthless little smile, "and the crowd, of course."

"Andree," cried the preacher, looking more alarmed than ever. "What in the world are you trying to do? Go back to our wagons immediately. This is no place for a lady."

"She's just a little peacemaker," grinned Dooley. "Seems to know a hell of a lot more about it than ye do."

"*Peacemaker!*" The hissing woman in the crowd was at it again. "And a *lady!* My God, deliver me from riding astraddle like a Tom-boy."

"I heard her whistlin' only yesterday," whispered in a lanky old Missouri woman. "Ye know the sayin': 'A whistlin' woman an' a crowin' hen always come to some bad end.'"

"Andree!" Eldon Parker's voice was shrill and harsh now, his face and lips bloodless. "I said go back to the wagons!"

The girl ignored him this time. Other women snook their heads and nodding knowingly. Horse following her, Andree Parker walked on with Killane's and Dooley's horses trailing them. Reluctantly the crowd opened to let them pass.

THEY mounted outside the rim of the crowd and rode on up the valley.

Now that he had been thoroughly whipped for the first time in his life, the train captain suddenly found a world of staunch friends around him. A number of women

had thought all along that his jokes and sayings were funny. They had forgiven him for his spontaneous outbursts, calling it sheer fatigue and overburdened anxiety for the welfare of the entire train.

When he opened his eyes there were hopeful faces staring. A quick fire had been started beside one of the wagons to heat water. Two women were taking it upon themselves to wash the blood from his face. Others were there eager to help.

"And now they'll make 'im a saint," growled Dooley when they halted under the shaggy cottonwoods on the bank of the river, a mile ahead. "It's that fool way people have. So much like sheep or plain dumb animals. Half of them were ready to hang him to a limb this morning, if they'd had nerve enough."

"He's a little tin god, or he's going to be," the girl smiled mirthlessly. "Yes, it's always like that. People never change."

"Sheep following the leaders," agreed Dooley.

"I'm truly sorry that it had to happen," put in Killane.

"Don't say that to O'Toole," snapped the old man. "He lacks the bringing up at home and the character to say he's sorry."

"It's caused the break he hoped to cause." The girl looked anxiously back down the valley. "There are certain ones who have not been wanted in the train from almost the start. You're one, Johnny. Mr Dooley's another. There's big Mike Flannigan, the former army sergeant. There are the Murphys, the O'Briens, the Beavers, the Smiths—oh, just too many to mention right now. They'll all fall under the ban now."

"Meaning," nodded Killane, "that I will be ordered to leave the train?"

"Yes, Johnny." She looked at him quickly, a catch in her voice. "You, and the others. It has been brewing for a long time. The trouble brought it to a head." She avoided his half-amused eyes and stared at the ground. "Father will be found siding with Mr O'Toole."

"Aye!" agreed Dooley with another grin. "And why? Tim O'Toole's starting a big general store out here—on the Yellowstone, if your father takes up land there. He has four big freighters filled with goods right back there in the train. More

will come by steamboat. The store would make him a well-fixed son-in-law."

"Don't talk of such things now, please." The girl lifted her hand. "Johnny already knows. He knows that mother is with us." She was staring back at the train. "They're going to pitch camp before it's dark this time."

"Maybe Big Tim needs a rest," chuckled Dooley.

They stared silently for a few moments, realizing even from the distance that some one down there was going to mess it up. Big Tim was not to be seen, but the girl's father was there, galloping back and forth. With him were a couple of characters known as Spade Cheeney and Burt Blue, two black-beards not to be relied on even as stock guards. Oldtimers in the train were keeping out of it.

"If they'd only come on six or seven hundred more yards they would have had a good place," scowled Dooley. He lifted his hand, pointing to a thick grove of trees surrounded by tall rocks. "Spring of mighty nice water right in the middle of it, too."

Killane nodded. "And, yet they take to the almost open ground. I suppose they're depending on the high river bank for protection."

"Protection, yer heel," Dooley laughed. "They've forgotten about what ye said of the Indians, if anybody's yet had a chance to tell them."

"Indians?" The girl stared at him. "What Indians?"

Killane told her of the smoke signals and other signs. "Big Tim knows. He saw the smoke signals—and warned me not to excite the people in the train. Just fool enough to ride into hell with both eyes wide-open, and then blame somebody else for it."

THEY stared at the hills all around for a minute now, looking for more signs. The sun had dropped out of sight. There were no more smoke signals up there.

Even Indians had to be forgotten when they started riding back toward the train. By taking Killane and Dooley away so hastily it might have looked like a run-out. It had been the best thing that could have happened. Had either man remained beside the wagons it would have meant

another fight with Big Tim. Now he had had time to cool off. He could sit back like a martyr, letting the other hot-heads grab things in their own hands for the time being. By their rush and excitement they would get to the very thing he had been steadily working for since the first week out of Independence.

Killane could see him when they came to the edge of the rude half-circle of wagons. He was like a king on a throne—a white-patched, swollen and bandaged king. He sat on a rock covered with cushions, another at his back, women and men still around him. If he saw Killane he ignored him entirely. Several of the women turned and glared at him.

Other men, some helped by their women, were unyoking their oxen, glad of a chance to let them graze. Killane noticed at once that others were not stirring from their seats, but were simply waiting for something, faces grim, eyes brooding.

Eldon Parker appeared, still bloodless of lip as he glared at them.

"We're holding an important vote just after supper, Killane," he snapped. "Very important. We must have unity in this train. We must have peace. As the Bible tells us, 'If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out.' God knows I haven't wanted it—"

"But it's come," cut in Dooley, stabbing a gnarled forefinger toward him. "An' ye take sides wth four loads of freight. We know all that. Ye won't need yer damned vote, Parker. Johnny Killane's rolled with wagon trains over all the main trails out here, with his daddy as captain. Without having to tell ye, Johnny's brought 'em in an' through without too much trouble, even in the toughest Indian—"

"Andree," Parker ignored him. "Andree, you will return to your mother. At once. I want a few words with you."

"Give her hell," grinned Dooley. "Maybe ye can whip 'er, though I doubt ye're man enough for that. We'll quit yer damned train without a vote, sky-pilot—and a hell of a good riddance to the whole mess of ye."

"Andree," Killane turned to the girl. "If you want to come with us, come on. We'll fight hell where anything concerns you. If you need us we won't be too far away."

He galloped off down the line of wagons.

A quick halt and a few words caused seven huge old Conestoga freighters to start moving out of the line. Others followed until there were twenty-two wagons abruptly quitting the train.

"My outfit and his with others joining," nodded Dooley. "People are tired of Big Tim, Parson. They're tired of yer mouth, if ye only could realize it."

"Mark my word, Dooley!" The preacher lifted his long arm to point to the seven big freighters. "We'll especially watch those wagons. Captain O'Toole has been suspicious of them all the while. The drivers keep too much together. They never come to my Sunday services or evening and morning prayers. They are an unholy lot."

"Johnny Killane trains men to keep their mouths shut." Dooley chuckled. "Nobody but a select few knows that he owns those big freighters and all the goods in 'em. Ye'd skin yer own daughter and sell her pretty hide for a four-wagon start into business. Now I kin tell ye Johnny has his already. Him and his daddy own old Fort Bleeding Rock on the Ruby, and they ain't never been accused of doing a lick of trading with the redskins that could be called shady."

"I ain't supposed to tell ye, even now." He swung his horse to one side. "But I did. Next time with a gal for sale don't bid on the wrong horse!"

Chapter IV

RED RUIN AHEAD!

THE MAIN train was ready to roll before the first glimmer of sunlight appeared around the peaks in the east. There had been grumbling and dissent in the camp until midnight—long after bedtime. Big Tim had taken no sides in any of it, for once keeping his long, thick nose out of it. He had eaten his supper beside his big wagons, wolfing great quantities of antelope steak and five or six boiled potatoes. He had drunk three pints of tea blacker than a pirate's beard. Afterwards he had perched himself on a wagon tongue, aloof from the rest of the world, puffing at his short-stemmed corncob pipe. Then he had turned in for the night.

Morning found him clicking and clack-

ing his teeth over a breakfast as enormous as his supper. He was in but little better humor than when turning into his blankets—looking hurt and quiet. His scowl was black through the covered cuts and lumps on his face. Time and again he looked up the river to the spot where Killane had made his tight camp among the tall rocks.

Killane was a fool who could not possibly come to a good end. Big Tim O'Toole, himself, had looked at that camping spot, yet at the time he had held no thought of calling a halt.

It was a damnable spot, cursed by Hell itself. He had seen the big spring bubbling from a bowl of rocks, the icy-cold and crystal-clear water spilling down to the river. At the same time he had seen other things to make a strong man suddenly weak and ill at the pit of the stomach. Women might have whimpered and turned quickly away to hide their eyes.

Other would-be settlers had camped in the place, possibly last fall. Bleached bones had been left behind among the charred hulks of what had been wagons. The skeletons of horses, mules and oxen were everywhere. With them here and there were the skeletons of men, women and children—the white skull of a mere baby staring at him with empty sockets, a bullet hole square in the center of the chalky forehead.

Outside the rocks, spilled hopelessly in a great half-circle, were skeletons and more skeletons. Out there in a terrific din of guns and Indian yells, redskins and ponies had died by the dozens, their bones left behind to show the awful fury of the fighting. Neither side had been willing to let up until the end. The Indians had not even gone back to pick up their dead.

On this backtrail not so often followed by other wagon trains it meant that the desperate whites had cut the reds to pieces in their last stand, leaving those remaining too weak and few to bother about the other bodies. They had probably loaded themselves with scalps, and had turned back for their hideout somewhere in the hills.

No woman wanted to glimpse such leavings of raw reality in this wide and wild land, the rightful home of the red man, the eagle, the buzzard, and the buffalo.

Big Tim had ordered the train to sweep

wide of the spot. Killane and those who had so brazenly deserted the train to follow him and old man Dooley were still in camp, and it looked yet half-asleep from the distance. But that mattered little. Laziness would not get them far. Before he had gone a mile Eldon Parker came galloping up and slowed his horse to a walk.

"Yes, decidedly *yes*," nodded Parker with his long, sad face. "It is apparent even now that the deserters have placed themselves in hands that will fail them! Look, Captain O'Toole!"

Screwed to the right in his light farm saddle, the preacher had glanced back at the train, his face growing pale. "What is the meaning of that, sir? Wagons are cutting out of the train and heading toward Killane's infernal camp in those rocks."

"Eleven more of them, yes," grimly nodded the sweating train captain after a swift and breathless count. "More foolish deserters going to join that man."

"Let them go!" He tried to shrug and laugh. "They'll be sorry if they never see an Indian. Killane and Dooley will only lose them somewhere in the hills to starve like the Donner Party on the way to California!"

"Or he'll lose them by drowning every living thing in some swift river."

"But look, there's more." O'Toole had swung his horse and was staring at other wagons breaking the line. "Twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—*sixteen*, by God! They can't do this to me. I won't stand for it." He reared himself high in his stirrups. "There go the Flannigans and the O'Briens, both men from Roscommon the same as myself. Why those dirty, yellow dogs of—"

"Calm yourself, Captain O'Toole." The preacher swung his horse closer and placed a gentle but firm hand on his arm. "It matters little where a man is from. Men are men, sinful or devout. If God cannot change them, then why should you attempt it?"

"This is like death." He opened his free hand as a gesture of hopelessness. "Death comes. We cannot avoid it. Once it comes we must make the best of it."

"'Tis right ye are, I guess," the train captain admitted. "I've heard that one on

his way to Hell must go to Hell, and there's no way of stopping him. We'll try to forget them. But if they ever come to me for a favor, they'll never get so much as a drop of water for a sick and dying horse—not if I one day own the Yellowstone River!"

"Oh, yes, they will, my good man!" The preacher smiled one of his sad-faced smiles. "Something tells me they'll be coming to you for help long before we get to the Yellowstone, Captain O'Toole. With your big, generous heart you will help them, even at the risk of your own life."

It was soothing, that kind of talk. Both were quiet for a long time as they rode on. The train captain's eyes were constantly watching the country ahead that was growing rougher and taller by the half-mile. His thoughts kept going back to those smoke signals in the high break of the peaks yesterday afternoon. He tried to put them aside. After all, travelers often saw such things. Red men sometimes used them as a bluff to keep the nerves of white men scraped to the raw. A mere youth or a toothless old squaw on a far peak or a mountain rim could send up signals into the sky—one lone red throwing a scare into the hearts and souls of two or three hundred white men.

AS THE day wore on he grew more and more confident. The sky was clear. A man could see for miles, and there was no hint of trouble anywhere. Behind them, marked by a cloud of dust, Killane and his deserters were trailing by a good three miles. At dark they were even further behind, for they had camped just before sunset. At that sloppy pace, O'Tooley knew that they would be far, far in the rear in three or four days time.

One thing hurt. Andree Parker made it a point to avoid him. She kept to the high seat of her father's wagon, sitting up there beside her mother. When the third night came, Parker made it a special point to invite him to supper for a feast of sage hens one of the hunters had brought in. The girl quietly avoided him by taking herself off to a campfire several wagons away to have supper with Pat Kenshaw and his wife and daughter.

At three o'clock in the afternoon of the

sixth day the girl was forgotten and fear drove like a knife straight to the train captain's heart. Parker was with him, a good mile ahead of the train, when they saw a young scout wheeling back to them. As soon as the scout was close enough he was yelling words that always meant a scare:

"Indians! Indians! Indians!"

"Stop your yelling," cried O'Toole as soon as he could catch his voice. "Don't startle the whole world."

"He's young," warned the preacher, staring at a tall, thin youth called Honey Crow. "Maybe he's mistaken."

"Maybe he's seen a couple of mountain goats," snorted O'Toole, trying to crowd down the lump in his throat. "Come out of your scare, Crow. Act like a man, not a scared monkey."

"They're ahead of us, sir." The youth brought his bay to a halt, the sweat-lather stringing. "No more than two miles ahead where the valley narrows into a canyon. They're all along each of the rims—hundreds an' hundreds of 'em."

"What in the devil are they doing?"

"Just standing there looking down," explained the youth, fighting to get some of the panting out of his breath. "They look bad. Not like the reds that come to beg. They're big an' bold. Just waitin', I guess, to kill us all."

Chapter V

RIDE FOR HELL-AND-GONE

BIG TIM O'TOOLE and Eldon Parker were white from the roots of their hair to their throats when they came around the bend a thousand yards away. There was nothing cowardly about it. Here was danger—death staring them in the face.

Honey Crow had gone galloping on back to the train to pass an order that the train was to be closed up promptly, leaving as little distance as possible between the wagons.

"And don't scare everybody to death," Big Tim bawled as the youth was racing away. "Use some sense."

With a tight train a good leader could have it swung into a wheel-locked fighting circle in minutes. A loosely strung-out

train took longer, and a leader was liable to lose a number of wagons in a quick attack.

The Indians were here, all right. Not hundreds of them but about thirty—feathered figures stripped for a fight, war-paint smearing them, the sunlight playing along the barrels of rifles.

"This is a trick of some kind," groaned the train captain. "They wouldn't show themselves like that unless it was. They always try to keep from showing themselves until the last moment."

"But what's the trick?" stammered the preacher, clawing at his collar as if it choked him. "I never heard or read of anything like it."

"They're there to stop us, to hold us for something. Listen. Faith, I seem to hear something somewhere!"

"I hear nothing!" Parker was still clawing at his collar, great drops of cold perspiration forming on his face. "What are we going to do? We can't just sit here and stare back at them, Captain O'Toole."

"And, damn it, we can't jump up there two or three hundred feet and grab them by the heels! We've got to prepare for a fight."

"If only Killane and the others were with us."

"Damn Killane and the others." It looked as if Big Tim was ready to grab him, drag him from his saddle, and stomp him. "They'll need us more than we'll ever need them."

No man could have expected anything but the worst here, and would have started making his camp and getting ready for action. This was not the best place a man could find to make a stand-off battle. Even Eldon Parker could see that.

The valley was wide enough for a train twice the size of the one behind to go into a circle, but there was little or no shelter at hand. The riverbank was low, and the stream hugged sheer cliffs three hundred feet high. If a train went into a circle or a tight half-circle against the water, it could be attacked from the rims of the cliffs. Flaming arrows coming down would soon turn it into a blazing and crackling hell-on-earth filled with the yelling of men and the screaming of scorching women and children.

"It's wrong, all wrong, the way they're

acting." Big Tim kept shaking his head and muttering. "I don't know what to make of it. Maybe we should turn and head back down the valley."

"And join with Killane," agreed the preacher, throwing all his thoughts wide-open now. "It's the only thing to do, O'Toole."

"Go back to those dogs after they sneaked away from me?" O'Toole turned on him with a roar. "Don't you know that would kill me."

"But think of the others," cried Parker, scared now beyond all measure. "There's my wife and daughter. There are the



Men were galloping forward . . .

wives and children of others in this train. Damn it, man, you must be humane. You must have some streak of real manhood in you.

"You act like a spoiled brat, O'Toole. That's what makes many people despise you. You can't take a licking and get over it. You go into a sulk at the least provocation. Your head's thick. *Thick!* Killane and Dooley have told you. You're a know-it-all fool!"

Big Tim O'Toole tried to laugh at him. "You can't drive me back toward Killane." He clenched his big hammy fists. "I'd kill you first. Out here there is no law except the kind men carry on their hips." One hand relaxed and slid toward the butt of a six-shooter at his right hip.

HE CAUGHT himself, having glanced back down the valley. A dozen men from the train were galloping forward, rifle barrels shining across their laps, the weapons bobbing.

Honey Crow had done exactly what he had been told not to do. He had gone back and alarmed the entire train.

"Here comes your daughter, too." There was something like awe in Big Tim's tone when he came out with that. The girl had been keeping her horse tied behind the wagon. Now she was back in the saddle, the tomboy with a rifle across her lap, a six-shooter at either hip. "Why the hell doesn't she stay back where a girl belongs?"

"That's probably the same question that Adam asked Eve," smirked the preacher. "Who in thearnation ever had little enough sense to think he could tell what a woman will do?"

"Father! Father!" the girl was crying, getting ahead of the rest on her high-bred black. "Johnny's wagons are closing up on us! They're coming up fast."

"An' what'll they do when they get here?" bellowed a big man who had once been a steamboater on the lower Mississippi. "I had me a look at them wagons just a little while ago through my fine ol' telescope! Wimmin' an' kids are drivin' them wagons, all dressed up to look like men. Killane an' Dooley an' the rest musta run out on 'em."

"No, look—look, everybody!" screamed the girl, pointing on up the valley into the mouth of the canyon. "That's Johnny on his golden horse. Look what they're trying to do to him."

The Indians along the rims had jumped to life. Rifles had come up, blazes of fire lurching downward, the dust spurting up in little geysers around the zig-zagging horse, the rider hopelessly blazing back with a long six-shooter in either hand.

"It's Johnny," screamed the girl, lurching her horse forward. "Go into it, you men. Do something besides sit and stare like gaping fools. Go try to help him."

"Let him help himself," bellowed O'Toole. "He got himself into it, didn't he?"

"Andree! *Andree!*" cried the preacher. "Where in hell do you think you're going? Come back here."

"Watch that hoss come!" cried another man, too amazed to move a spurred heel. "I'll swear that fella's ridin' a flyin' hoss."

"Lis'en!" bawled another, standing high

in his stirrups, body in a strain with excitement. "I hear a cavalry bugle! Ain't that a cavalry bugle? Ain't it? *Damn it, somebody answer me!*"

"Shore it's a bugle!" yelled another, spurring forward. "Watch them damn Indians wheel an' run for it!"

"An' hear them guns rakin' it into 'em from behind." Another man was spurring forward to follow the girl. "Hot damn, they're right now catchin' hell from both backsides."

No one even guessed that it was former army sergeant Flannigan up there with a battered bugle rolling out the calls, while the others from Johnny Killane's train were closing in on the reds from behind.

"**YOU'RE** no man to command a wagon train, Tim O'Toole." Killane was soon giving it to him full-blast and straight from the shoulder, right in front of everybody as the train crept on up.

"You think you know too damned much! If you don't know you try to rule or ruin, anyhow. You're only a blustering, tin-horn bully, too cowardly to fight a real man unless you're sure in that too-sure mind of yours that you can lick the boots off him with a blow or two."

The Indians were gone from the rims, those who could getting away as quickly as they could. Others were left dead or dying. Far on up the canyon an evil black smoke could be seen hanging against the sky.

"We've known for a full day and a half what was coming, O'Toole," Killane went on. "You would never let me have more than two or three scouts, and they were men you'd pick, not real scouting timber. I couldn't work with you. Nobody could. What little real scouting I managed to get done was on the sly. You wouldn't believe me then. You didn't want the people in the train to know anything. You were afraid they'd kick you out; get somebody else."

"We scouted in our part of the train, throwing men miles ahead of you. See that?" He laughed in the larger man's face, then turned and pointed to the black smear against the sky. "That's the smoke of burned cabins and houses. That's mur-

der lying on your own doorstep. There was a new settlement at the other end of that canyon. Most of it is gone, and dead and dying settlers are scattered all around.

"I was there with the few men I could spare before dawn this morning. The last thing this afternoon, Flannigan and the other men slipped away to watch the redskins who were holding this train back, hoping to finish off the rest of the settlement, then kill every man, woman and child in this outfit.

"One man was sent to try to get through to an army outpost on the Powder and bring troops back. My ride was to tell Flannigan and the others that those troops had come—and that they could start pouring it into the reds holding you from the rims.

"All right," he laughed wildly. "The man I sent got through. I learned not long ago that he got there on the bloody back of a horse with two arrows in his back and three bullets in his body! A dying man who would not give up, a fighting man, the kind this frontier needs and wants. A man, by God, from County Cork whose name was Jerry Dooley!"

They wouldn't let him finish it. They were not in the mood to hear anything more. The Indians were gone. Soldiers were somewhere around them. Their women and children were safe once more.

All at once a howling, shouting, yelling and cheering mob was rushing him. Hands swept him off his feet. They swung him high up on their shoulders, slapping him, hugging him. When they let him down they thrust him straight into the waiting arms of Andree Parker.

"Now where'n hell's that would-be captain of the train?" bellowed a rusty-haired, raw-boned Missourian, rolling up his sleeves. "Where'n hell is he, I'm askin'?"

"Gone with the comin' shadows," cried back an answering voice, an old man lifting a long arm to point. "Somethin' tells me he ain't a-comin' back! Look at 'im go!"

O'Toole's white horse was racing him far down the valley. Forgotten was the store on the Yellowstone and the pretty girl. They were the last things on his mind now as he glared straight ahead and hoped for the best.



ROUND-UP

By G. ARTHUR ALAN

GHOSTS of outlaws dead and gone ride the dim trails, or so legend has it. Billy the Kid didn't die at Fort Sumner to the roar of Pat Garret's sixes. Curly Bill escaped the gun-trap death at Agua Negra Spring in Arizona. Bill Longley cheated the hangnoose they placed around his neck back there in Giddings, Texas.

So the stories go, still told by old-timers around the lonely roundup fires in the

in Giddings, Texas on October 11, 1878. His execution was quite an attraction. Hundreds of people came from miles around to witness it. They saw him plunge through the gallows trap, saw him jerk spasmodically at the end of the rope, heard the doctor pronounce him dead, saw him cut down and placed in a coffin along with the hangrope. Later they saw the coffin buried in the family plot in Lee County, Texas. How was it then that Bill Longley

Not even the bitter finality of death, nor the ton of moist sod piled heavily on the broken corpses of these three fabulous frontier outlaws could keep them fettered in the moldering confines of their owl-hoot graves. . . .

Southwest. But are they true? Did these men live long afterward to mock the law and justice that miss-fired in each of their cases, to ride the outlaw trail and harken to the night-cry of the hoot-owl and the furtive rustle of the leaves?

Here are the facts or the fiction—which-ever the case may be—as told in the Southwest by men who claim to know.

There may be some truth that Bill Longley escaped the hangnoose. He was hanged

was seen by a friend a few days later at Galveston boarding a ship bound for South America?

As the story goes Bill Longley, a well-known Texas killer and an outlaw, had been tried and convicted for the murder of a farmer named Wilson Anderson, and had been sentenced to hang. Awaiting his execution he had languished in jail, and it was during this time that he was fitted with a special harness beneath his clothing. It

consisted of a metal band around his neck from which leather straps like stirrups led down around his insteps. The metal band was to prevent the hangrope from breaking his neck, and the straps were to cushion the jar of his fall.

The entire contrivance was supposed to have been made by a Giddings, Texas saddlemaker, and it was supposed to have been placed on the prisoner by Sheriff W. A. Brady just before the execution. Longley's relatives in and around Giddings were wealthy cattlemen and no doubt had the means to pay for any such bizarre scheme.

When the body fell through the gallows trap the hanging seemed realistic enough. Yet why did one of Longley's cousins leap to the gallows platform and threaten with drawn sixgun to shoot anyone who tried to cut the body down? Why after the outlaw was pronounced dead and cut down, was the public prevented from getting close to the body as it was placed in a coffin and carried away in a covered rig? Was Longley alive in that coffin? Did he make his escape later that night to Galveston, and from there by boat go all the way to South America?

They say he was seen by a friend at Galveston; that the friend spoke to him but that he didn't answer; that after a frightened look he bounded up the gangway to the waiting ship. They say a Mexican was murdered and placed in the coffin and buried in the family plot, just in case the grave was ever exhumed. But the official recordings of Lee County, Texas reveal that Bill Longley was hanged by the neck until dead October 11, 1878.

Curly Bill Brocius rode rough-shod through the Arizona chaparral, a dashing Robin Hood outlaw, rustling from the rich, helping the poor. He waylaid rich pack-trains of smuggled silver from Skeleton Canyon in Mexico and he ran wet cattle across the border and sold it to the none-too-particular ranchers of Arizona.

He struck swiftly and mercilessly, at the head of his band, yet he was kind to the poverty-stricken Mexicans of the territory, and was loved by them as a reckless, dashing caballero. The story that he lived long after his supposed death at Agua Negra Spring is plausible.

On their exodus from Tombstone, a

posse headed by Wyatt Earp—consisting among others of Doc Holliday, and Texas Jack—ran into Curly Bill and his gang at the spring. Curly Bill had been known to have been friendly with the Clantons during the famed Earp-Clanton feud, and the Earp posse was out to clean Cochise County of their enemies before leaving Arizona.

The battle at Agua Negra Spring began at once, lasting all through the hot day. Badly outnumbered, Curly Bill's band was wiped out. Among the scattered corpses was that of Curly Bill. Riding up close to the outlaw, Texas Jack fired another bullet through the dead outlaw's head.

But Curly Bill wasn't killed at Agua Negra Spring, they say. He escaped from the Earp posse, and crossed the border into Mexico where he married the comely daughter of a Mexican ranchero whom he'd courted. There he settled down and became wealthy. Years later, they say, a tall, gray-headed man stepped off the train at Tombstone. He was dressed as a prosperous cattleman and he shook hands with the friends who knew him from years gone by. That man, it is alleged, was Curly Bill, paying Tombstone a little visit.

Somewhat more far-fetched is the story that Billy the Kid escaped death that fateful night at Pete Maxwell's ranch house in Fort Sumner, New Mexico. Upon receiving word that Billy the Kid was taking refuge at the Maxwell ranch, Sheriff Pat Garret and deputies Poe and McKinney had ridden out to the ranch.

They were talking to Pete Maxwell in the darkened living room, when they heard the slam of the rear porch door. Billy had been out to the root cellar after a piece of beef to fry for his evening meal, and had no knowledge of Maxwell's visitors. As soon as he saw the shadowed shapes of the three talking to Maxwell, his voice rose questioningly:

"Quien es? Quien es?"

"It's me, Bill. Put 'em up!" Garret had answered, but his voice was lost in the roar of Colt thunder as Billy the Kid fired. The gun in Garret's hand thundered in answer and the Kid staggered into the room and fell, his gun spewing lead at the floor. He was buried at Fort Sumner.

Several years later, however, this story came out in the Southwest.

ROUND-UP

High in the New Mexico hills a rancher had a visitor one blizzardy winter night—a young fellow with prominent teeth who'd come to seek shelter from the storm. Outside the wind howled and the snow piled deep in the canyons, but inside the rancher's cabin it was snug and warm.

After an evening meal of bacon and flapjacks the two loafed about the pot-bellied stove in the one-room cabin, smoking and talking. The stranger dropped a casual remark about the rancher's six-shooter hanging from a wall peg.

"H'm? Yep!" the rancher took the pipe from his mouth, stirred and brought the gun back to his chair. He toyed with it affectionately, the lamplight giving back its blue-black glint. "Yep. Colt .44 Bisley. Belonged to Billy the Kid once. Took it off him myself. Yep. That was quite a night, something like this. Stormin' bad all day."

He handed the weapon to the stranger who took it and handled it caressingly, tested its balance. "Nice gun," the stranger said, but the rancher didn't hear. He was poking a splinter into the stove and using it to light his pipe.

"Yep," the rancher said. "I'd ridden out with a posse under Sheriff Pat Garret from Lincoln. Garret had word that Billy an' his gang were goin' to be at Fort Sumner for th' Christmas dance. Garret figured we'd waylay the Kid and his gang as they rode into the Fort. We waited in th' dark, an' pretty soon the Kid and his boys rode up.

"Garret yells at them to throw up their hands. But one of the outlaws, Tom O'Folliard, goes for his gun. We all open up then, and O'Folliard drops from his saddle dead. Billy and the other four swung their broncs and skedaddle.

"We tried to trail 'em that night, but it was almost impossible in th' drivin' storm. Toward daybreak a fella brought word that Billy and his gang were holed up in a rock cabin at Stinkin' Spring, no doubt thinkin' that Garret had give up th' chase 'count of the blizzard.

"Garret had us surround the house and we waited there in th' snow till daylight. One of the outlaws, Charlie Bowdre, steps out of the cabin at dawn, figurin' to feed th' horses. Garret calls to him to surren-

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der, but Bowdre reaches for his gun, and Garret shoots him down. Garret then tells the Kid he's got the place surrounded and that he'd better give up peaceable, but the Kid yells right back to us to go to hell!

"There's a long wait, an' th' outlaws take a few shots at us from th' one window in th' cabin, and we shoot back a few times. It looks pretty bad for the Kid, without food and water. Either they'd have to give up or starve to death. Somehow th' outlaw's get a-hold of the horses which they's left outside tethered on th' lee side of th' cabin. They start draggin' them into the cabin by th' bridle reins, figurin', no doubt to make a dash for it a horseback out the cabin door.

"Garret takes good aim an' drops one of th' horses half in and half out of th' doorway, blocking any of attempt th' Kid and his men might make to get away, an' finally th' Kid came out hisself, wavin' a white flag. I managed to get a-hold of his gun.

"They took Billy down to Lincoln tuh jail then, but he wasn't there long. He slipped out o' his handcuffs, and killed his jailers, Bob Ollinger and J. W. Bell, and got away. Wasn't long afterward though, that Sheriff Pat Garret got him at Maxwell's ranch at Fort Sumner.

"Yep. An' I've got Billy's gun. Kept it all these years as a sort of a souvenir, yuh know."

The stranger handed the gun back to the rancher. He rose, knocked the dottle from his pipe, and laid it on a shelf. He returned the gun to its wall peg.

"Reckon I'll hit th' hay," he yawned. "Mornin' comes early."

He filled the stove with wood to last out the long night and blew out the lamp. Removing his boots he curled up on his bunk. Across the room the stranger prepared to bed down in the bunk.

At dawn the rancher awakened, to find the storm gone outside, and the cabin cold. Across the room the bunk was empty. The stranger had gone. The Colt Bisley was gone from its wall peg. On the table he found this penciled note:

Thanks for the bacon and flapjacks and for putting me up. And thanks for taking such good care of my gun.
Billy Bonney

BOOTHILL ANTE

(Continued from page 81)

into the dark—Matt rushed forward. Being the second tall man in black he felt reasonably safe. The table was a mass of flames. Someone was pounding on the bar door. He kept out of the light, jerked his hat down low.

"Boss, the money," rasped Skinny Kanse. They were crouched behind an old wagon, stood up as the tall, black-clad figure came toward them. "We shot 'im in the doorway, boss. We figured something was wrong. Afraid to wait until he got out in the dark like old Cherney." Suddenly Skinny Kanse's face froze, and he was swinging sixgun up at Matt.

Matt thumbed hammer as Skinny's gun swung up. Hot lead seared past his cheek, and he saw the small man stagger, crash back against a wagon wheel. Then another gun roared, from one side. The flame lashed into Injun Pete. He gasped, shuddered. Two guns crashed into him, and he sprawled down.

Matt saw the two men hurrying up, guns smoking. "We heard it all," Jake was saying. "We come around here when we saw Evans close the office door. Figured something might happen."

Young Cherney stared down at the bodies of the two gunmen. "'Pears like I won't get to tie that knot," he said. "But Harte, I'm still ready to pay the reward. Course, it wouldn't mean much to a rich man like you."

Matt laughed, pointed in at the office. "That's twenty-five thousand dollars in greenbacks burning, boys. Took a bottom-card ace to get 'em. Now they aren't worth any more'n the ace is."

The crowd from the saloon broke through the office door. Matt joined them in staring at the burned money. "Soaked in kerosene, every dollar burnt," he said finally. "Say, Cherney. I'll take that reward money, if Jake figgers it'll buy a share in M Bar J ranch."

He knew then, where he was headed. The burning of the money had evened up the past, had killed the change in him the last three years had made. "It's three years, Jake," he said. "Let's take up where we left off."

Solemnly, Jake shook his hand.



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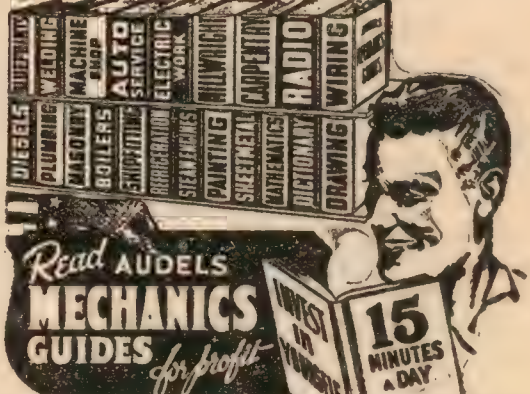
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 75)

of his .45 and the smell of burnt cordite lay heavy on the air. Neither the man on the floor—nor the short fellow with his head cradled on the desk—moved.

Boots pounded along the boardwalk and raced through the outer office. Suddenly the room was full of men—and eager hands were helping Lew Mason to his feet and into a chair.

"Hell, he's hurt!" Blaine Jackson snapped. "Somebody get Doc Anders pronto. And tell those teamsters to break it up and go home. We'll take them up on that new freighting deal as soon as they can convert their wagons. They'll not start any trouble now."

Setting his teeth against the pain, Lew let his head fall back against the chair. Or rather a soft shoulder that had somehow magically replaced the chair! Lew opened his eyes—and stared up into Sylvia Blaine's dark ones—worried and very tender now.

"Is it bad, darling?" Sylvia asked, her voice anxious. "Darn you, you can't die on me now."

"Don't worry," Lew grinned weakly. "There's nothing wrong with me that good nursing won't cure."

"You're going to get plenty of that, Mister!" Sylvia retorted softly. "I've grown to like that face of yours so much I guess I'll just have to look at it the rest of my life."

"Don't pay any attention to her, Lew," Blaine Jackson snorted. "Hell, love is all right, in its place. But right now, you've got a much more important reason to get well."

"With Bob Murphy dead, Murphy Oil belongs to you. As soon as you're able, I want to talk to you about extending pipe lines throughout the Cherokee Strip. It will be the greatest thing that ever—"

But with his head resting on Sylvia Blaine's soft shoulder, Lew Mason, trouble-shooter, wasn't interested in oil pipe lines. Hell, you could build pipe lines anytime. But there was only one time to take advantage of a woman's tenderness—now!

"Later," he said. "Much later," and he smiled up into Sylvia Blaine's dark eyes.

THE END

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DEAD SHOT

(Continued from page 52)

"Let it rest till mornin'," pleaded the sheriff. "We can't be fools by jumpin' to quick conclusions."

There was nothing more to be done for Big Buck Miller. Sneed had stretched the body out flat on the back and placed nickels on his eyes after crossing his hands on his stomach. As a cowboy would, he had finished killing the horse with the bullet-shattered shoulder to take the poor brute out of his misery.

Knowing that he had a way out now, knowing that he could throw this job straight into old Rule Spencer's face, Pike Farmer turned to the heavy door. With a kick he sent it flying open, sparks blowing from the fireplace, and stepped boldly into the room, the old floor boards squeaking and swaying underfoot. At that instant a long old Colt roared under the wrinkled and moth-eaten buffalo robe covering the body of the dead man on the floor, the one gash of flame appearing to shake the cabin.

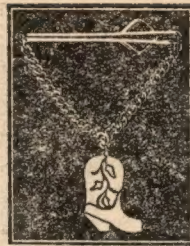
Shot through the stomach, the bullet entering at the almost exact spot where his bullet had entered Big Buck Miller, Pike Farmer, alias Jim Ladner, staggered back, rocked to the right against the jamb of the door, and plunged to the floor.

"Damn!" he gasped. "He—allus said he'd kill the man—who killed him. God! He did!"

"AFTER he was dead?" Men were still asking old Doc Bill Wright that same question a week later. "How's a dead man gonna kill yuh?"

The doctor had tried to answer it so often he was weary of the subject. To put it plainly, it was the stiffening of the dead. Stagecoach Phil was lying there with a cocked six-shooter under that robe. Slept that way a lot, they say, when drunk.

"Farmer jarred the floor when he stepped in the room, moved the body slightly as the old boards gave under his feet. He had gone to a lot of trouble, stealing cartridges from Rowdy to put the guilt on him. Rowdy's were a brand-new brand here in the Bend. Drew's shot from a dead hand changed all that setup. Rowdy should make us a good sheriff, don't you think?"



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(Continued from page 23)

around each other's waists. When Jimmy swung from his saddle Ida gave Mary a quick hug, then shoved her towards Jimmy, and Jimmy Dixon grabbed Mary as she stumbled into his arms.

Then the Grant boys reined up and their blind father came out. When his two big sons greeted him the tears came into the sheepman's eyes and course unchecked down his leathery face.

It was the blind man Vance Grant who said it would be a good idea for Jimmy and Mary to be married the evening after Vern Grant's funeral. He said Vern would want it thataway.

Ida said she'd like to borrow the parson later. She said that she wasn't taking any chances on Fred Udell changing his mind and running off as soon as he was able to get up and around again. She smiled when she said it.

When they were married and Ida repeated her part of the marriage vows after the parson, there was a sincerity in the tone of her voice and a depth to her dark eyes. The Widder Smith knew that for the first time her daughter Ida actually loved a man. Ida and Fred were going to be happy there on Fred's little ranch. Something told her Ida was going to be happy and content for the rest of her life.

Udell pinned his town marshal badge on Tub of Guts, and Tub was the proudest man in Alkali that night.

Vance Grant and Old Man Dixon and Buck slipped off and down to the dark quiet of the feed and livery barn where they squatted on their hunkers and passed the jug and smoked and augured.

The Widder Smith superintended the quiet supper at the hotel dining room where the women of Alkali gathered with their homemade cooking and the strong black coffee the menfolks liked.

It was all quiet and subdued and as it should have been—like the peace and quiet after a bad storm has passed.

Down at the barn, there in the dark shadows, it was Buck Bell who put it into words.

"We got a-plenty to thank the Almighty God for. I don't reckon He'd mind if we had a little drink on that."

THE END

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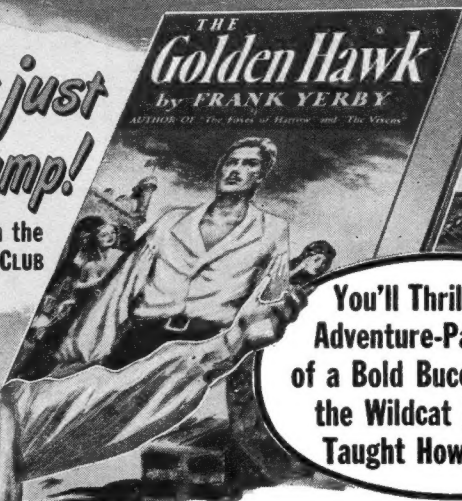


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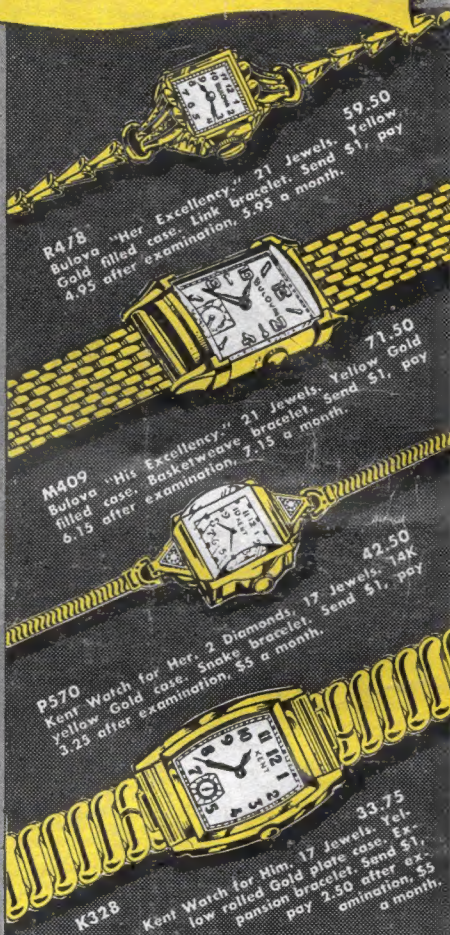


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